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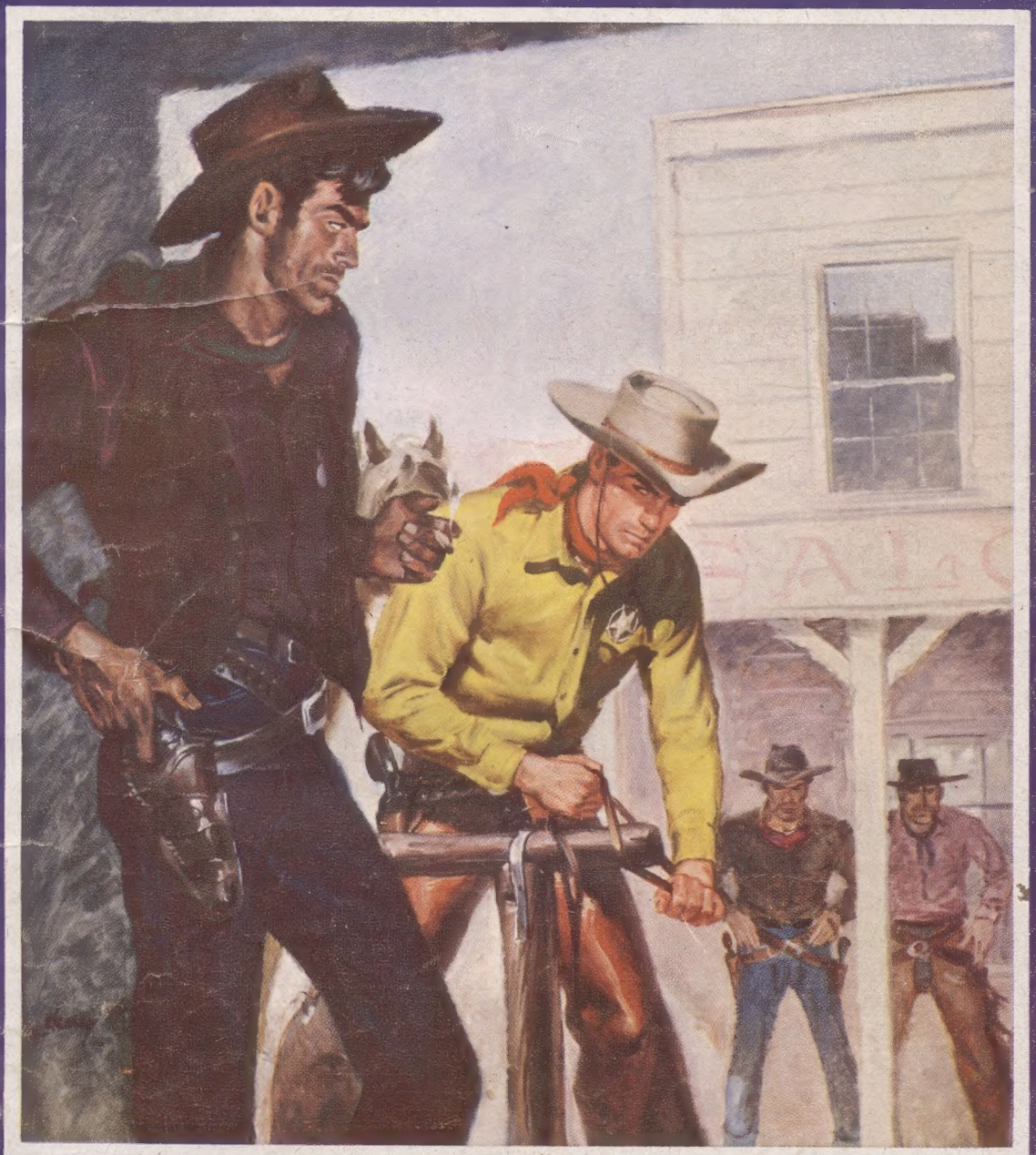
TEXAS RANGERS



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TEXAS RANGERS

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

VOL. 44, NO. 2 OCTOBER, 1951

A New Jim Hatfield Novel

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Perched atop a tall mesa, in the center of the desert, sat a great steamship—with bandits looting its hold

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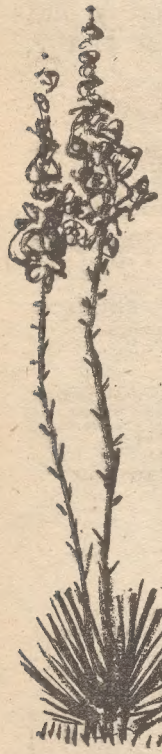

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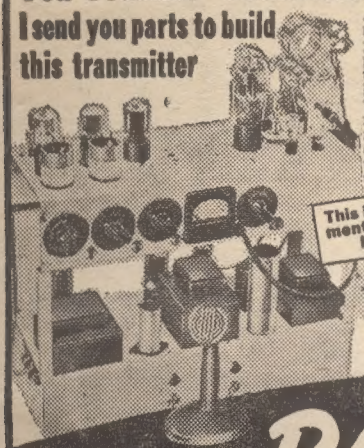
You Practice COMMUNICATIONS

I send you parts to build this transmitter

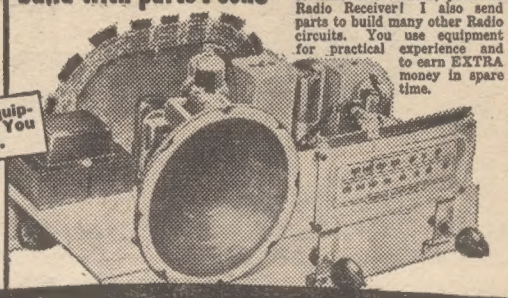


As part of my Communications Course you build this low power broadcasting transmitter, learn how to put a station "on the air," perform procedures demanded of Broadcast Station operators, make many tests.

This is just part of the equipment my students build. You keep all parts I send.

You Practice Radio SERVICING

on this modern radio you build with parts I send



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Television is TODAY'S Good Job Maker

In 1950, over 5,000,000 TV sets sold. By 1954, 25,000,000 TV sets estimated. Over 100 TV Stations now operating. Authorities predict 1,000 TV Stations. This means more jobs, good pay for qualified men all over the United States and Canada.

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Keep your job while training. Hundreds of successful RADIO-TELEVISION TECHNICIANS I trained had no previous experience, some only a grammar school education. Learn Radio-Television principles from illustrated lessons. Get PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE—build valuable multitester—experiment with circuits common to Radio and Television. Keep all equipment. Many students make $5, $10 extra a week fixing neighbors' Radios in spare time. SPECIAL BOOKLETS start teaching you the day you enroll.

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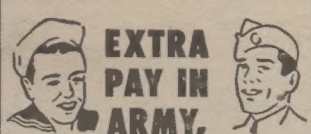
"Four years ago, I was a bookkeeper, with a hand-to-mouth salary. Now I am a Radio Engineer with a key station of the American Broadcasting Company network."—NORMAN H. WARD, Ridgefield Park, New Jersey.

"When halfway through the NRI course, I made $5 to $8 a week fixing sets in my spare time. Am now selling and installing Television sets and antennas."—E. J. STREITENBERGER, New Boston, O.

"My first job was operator with KDLR, obtained for me by your Graduate Service Dept. I am now Chief Engineer of Police Radio Station WQOX. I never hesitate to endorse NRI."—T. S. NORTON, Hamilton, Ohio.



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The Tale of a Spanish Dime

ONE time, while roaming the outlands from Texas west, I made camp one evening on a grassy benchland near a flowing spring and there I found a diez centavos piece—a Spanish dime, dated 1692, A.D. I was plenty excited over my discovery, figuring sure that such an old coin would be of great value. So I gallivanted to a collector of rare coins, a numismatist, plumb certain that he'd grab it up in a hurry.

He gave it a short look and flipped it over on his counter.

"What do you expect to get for it?" he asked.

"I don't just know what it is worth," I admitted. "But I'm willing to make a quick cash deal."

"For how much?"

"Oh, let's say coupla thousand dollars. You noticed the date on it, didn't you?"

"Sure," he nodded calmly.

"And it's in perfect condition!"

"Sure is. Been out of circulation quite a spell."

"And the way I happened to find it, that's important! It proves—it proves—!"

The Symbolic Dime

"Proves what? That Spanish explorers were around there three hundred-odd years ago? That's not news, amigo. They got around before that, those boys. Long before 1692, the New World was theirs, from Florida to California, down to the tip-end of South America. Spain was the most powerful country in the world, far greater even than the early Roman Empire. Today it's one of the smallest countries in Europe, being smaller than the State of Texas. But the riches and influence of old Spain have survived, like this dime. In a way, it's a symbol."

"Symbol o' what?"

"Of all we owe to the one-time mistress of the world, to Spanish-speaking people and all their descendants."

He proceeded, then, to deliver a lecture on the subject and I bet you gals and galluses will agree that it's about the most interesting dime's worth of history ever told.

"To begin with, Spain backed the discovery of America in 1492. But she didn't stop with Columbus. Inside 50 years, 38 other expeditions were sent out to explore the new continents and to colonize them. From the fifteenth to the seventeenth century, the deeds and accomplishmnts of Spanish pioneers were enormous, immortalizing the names of such leaders as Coronado, San Juan de Bautista, Fray de Anza, Ponce de Léon and many others.

Rule and Misrule

"The wealth and power of Spain extended far beyond the Americas, to southeast Asia, Australia and the Philippines. Then came the abuse of power and gradual political corruption. Spain's rule became misrule. She oppressed subject countries. She plundered and in the heat of holy zeal crusaded ruthlessly in one of the bloodiest episodes of human history, the Inquisition.

"What happened? Oppressed people fled from Spain and joining others expelled by the crusaders set themselves against the crown. Commerce dwindled, industry shrank and economic decline began. That was about the time your dime was minted. Spain lost her leadership to other nations, England, Holland and France. Her colonies revolted, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

"Then, in 1898, came the death blow to Spanish sovereignty in war with the United States, in which Spain was quickly and decisively beaten.

[*Turn to page 8*]

FOR PASSION... FOR POWER... HE BETRAYED HIS OWN COUNTRY!

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[*Continued from page 6*]

"Thus, in a period roughly from 1500 to 1900, the power and glory of Spain passed, as have all tyrannies. But Spain, shorn of her possessions, passed the torch of her culture and civilization to Spanish America. Today, from the Rio Grande southward, are 18 independent republics with some 70 million population who owe their traditions and their culture to Spain.

Banana Republics

"Some hidebound Norteamericanos think of these as little 'banana republics.' One of them, Argentina, is comparable in size to western United States and with Mexico is about the area of our country. Chile, from end to end, is the distance from New York to San Francisco. Uruguay, one of the smallest South-American republics, is larger than our six New England States.

"These people speak the language of Spain, have even enriched that already rich, expressive language with variations and additions. Next to English, Spanish is the language most used throughout the world. It contains some of the world's great literature. Early Spanish romances are the foundation of the modern novel. Lope de Vega ranks close to Shakespeare as a great dramatist. Cervantes' Don Quixote is said to be the most-read book, except the Bible. But that is not all. The language of Spain has contributed importantly to everyday American speech."

"You mean western expressions, such as lariat, ranch, hombre, adobe, corral and desperado?" I put in.

Words of Spanish Origin

"Those and many more. Embraced in the English language are such words as hurricane, embargo, cargo, gala, vanilla, chocolate, potato, tobacco, tomato, soda, cigar and buffalo, all of Spanish origin. Next to its Anglo-Saxon roots, our language owes most to Latin, and a great deal of the Latin was acquired by way of Spanish. The names of five of our States—California, Florida, Colorado, Nevada and Montana are of Spanish origin."

"To say nothing of thousands of place-names from Texas west," I remarked, "including the names of great cities such as San Francisco, mountains such as the Sierra Nevada, plateaus such as the Mogollon and Tonto Rim, valleys such as the San Joaquin and Sacramento and rivers, small towns, streets, native plants and heaps of other things that flavor our everyday lingo with Spanish words."

"You've got the idea," said the numismatist. "I suppose that's one reason that of all foreign languages, Spanish comes easiest to most Americans. To Westerners, anyhow. Another thing that makes it easy is that many words are spelled exactly the same in both English and Spanish. Such words as natural, animal, color, favor, editor, ideal, inspector, honor and original, for just a few examples."

"There's also," I pointed out, "a host of other words just about alike, only spelled just a mite different. Such words as nacíon, relacíon, persona, evidente, libertad, diferencia and importante."

"Absolutemente."

The Money Merchant's Offer

"Well, that's settled. Look now, suppose we get back to the máin subject," I hinted.

"What subject is that?"

"The matter of this Spanish dime. I'm waiting to hear your offer."

I figured he'd say one thousand, maybe, just as a starter. We could go on from there. But he didn't. Imagine my comedown when the money merchant up and says:

"Ten cents."

I went up in the air.

"Ten cents? Sufferin' sidewinders, are you loco?"

"Nope," he smiled. "But I would be if I offered you a penny more. It was worth 10 cents in 1692, when it was the coin of the realm. It's worth exactly the same today. In other words, coins such as this are so plentiful that they haven't any collector value, not any at all. Now what do you say?"

I swallowed my disappointment, but not my pride. I picked up my old dime and put it in my pocket. Then I said it, in my very best Spanish:

"Adíos, señor."

Whereupon I walked out to look for a pay telephone, where I could drop it in a slot and call the fool-catcher to come and get me.

BUILD A FINE BUSINESS FULL OR SPARE TIME!

Easy to Sell...

AIR-COOLED...AIR-CUSHIONED... MAKE MONEY FROM THE FIRST HOUR!

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Call on folks all around you—show and sell amazing NEW KIND OF SHOE! Hidden elastic in front makes it easy to SLIP ON OR OFF . . . no more broken laces or wrinkled tongues! And Built-in EXCLUSIVE Velvet-eez Air Cushioned Insole from heel to toe gives buoyant arch support on resilient, soothing-soft foam rubber!

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You can please almost everyone with our more than 150 styles of dress, sport, work shoes for men and women! Fit them CORRECTLY with easy, accurate methods. Draw on stock far bigger than customers could find in MANY stores combined. WE SHOW YOU HOW to fit, sell, build your business!

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GOOD HOUSEKEEPING SEAL HELPS OPEN DOORS . . . CLINCH SALES!

Women everywhere know and trust the Good Housekeeping Seal on Velvet-eez shoes. Neither you nor your customers can lose — and you have everything to gain.

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"I have been a salesman for thirty years, but I never thought selling could be so easy and pleasant. I HAVE A PAYDAY EVERY DAY I WORK. All I do is hand a new customer a sample and ask if he ever wore Velvet-eez Air Cushion shoes. I never forget to mention the way to give correct fit."
—W. M. Evans, Louisiana.

"For the past four years my average earnings have been around $80.00 per week part time! I couldn't have done it if it hadn't been for the liberal commissions paid by the Company on this wonderful line of shoes and garments that really is above and beyond competition."
—Charles Tuttle.

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CASH IN on fast-sellers like this Velvet-eez Air Cushion Insole Casual — worn and wanted by women from 16 to 60! Sizes 4 to 10, widths AA to EEE. Brings restful RELIEF from "Housework Feet!" Write for FREE Selling Outfit Today.

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WESTERNETTES

A Roundup of Range News Oddities

By

HAROLD HELFER

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On most ranges, at branding time, all the calves are separated from their mothers at the same time. When the chore is over, the calves are turned loose to rejoin their mothers. There is never a mistake—the cow always knows her own calf.

Director Ray Nazarro spent the better part of a day explaining via an interpreter an intricate battle scene to 100 Apache Indians on location at Sedona, Ariz. After the first take, which involved a group of Indians surrendering to George Montgomery and a troop of cavalry soldiers, one of the Apaches started walking off the set. "Where are you going?" Nazarro yelled without thinking. "I thought we were through after we surrendered," the Indian yelled back in perfect English.

Possibly the biggest grasshopper purge ever undertaken with private capital is underway at Warner Springs, Calif.—and out of this destruction project may come new hope for Western Agriculture. Tons of a new kind of poison are being dropped by a fleet of seven planes. The cost of the project is $53,000 and is being paid by the estate of the late George Sawday, pioneer San Diego county rancher. The sowing of the poison is being done during the period between hatching and growth of the grasshoppers' wings, when the insects are most voracious.

When Louis Albert, Missoula, Mont., came upon a bobcat in his woodshed, he didn't go for a revolver or rifle—he just picked up a club and dispatched the animal with a blow to the head. The retired rancher has the pelt, more than three feet long.

Hearing that the "Government is short of money," the Navajo tribal council at Window Rock, Ariz., recently discussed the possibility of lending Uncle Sam $500.

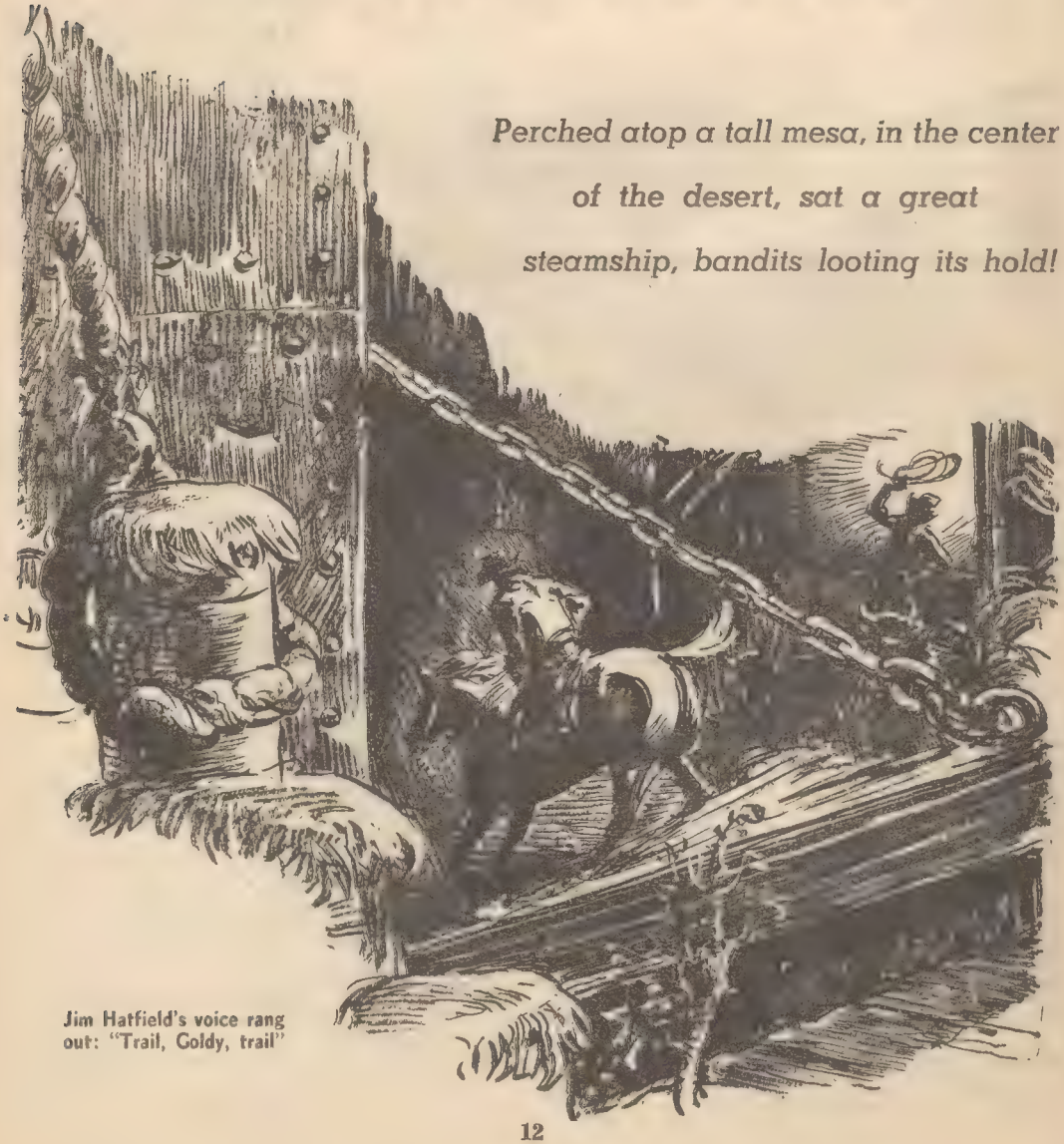
If it hadn't been for Mexican Bandit Pancho Villa, Gilbert Roland wouldn't be an American, much less a Hollywood star. Gilbert is the son of a Spanish bullfighter who was also the impressario in the Plaza in Ciudad Juarez. When Villa decreed the banishment of all Spaniards from Mexico and the hanging of all Chinese by their pigtails, Gilbert and his father jumped across the Rio Grande into Texas. "We were the first wetbacks," Gilbert smiles now.

The buffalo was once so plentiful on the Western plains that railroads held excursions whereby passengers could just lean out of the windows and shoot their game.

A Jim Hatfield Novel

RIDERS of the STORM

Perched atop a tall mesa, in the center of the desert, sat a great steamship, bandits looting its hold!



Jim Hatfield's voice rang out: "Trail, Goldy, trail"

by JACKSON COLE

CHAPTER I

Gift of the Sea

JIM HATFIELD, riding a trail that wound across the bayou country of Chambers county, pulled his tall golden sorrel to a halt and stared with unbelieving eyes.

"Cliff," he said to the man riding beside him, "do you see it, too?"

Young Cliff Weston, recently enrolled with the Texas Rangers, nodded his head.

"Yep, I see it," he admitted, "but it ain't there. Can't be!"

But it was. Perched sedately on a thirty-foot high bank was an ocean steamer.

With a Ragged Pick-up Posse, Jim Hatfield

No smoke rose from its rusty stack. Cargo booms swung idly. The deck was deserted. The battered plates of its tall sides gleamed in the late sunlight. From a drunkenly leaning staff, its silken folds flapping lazily in the breeze, hung the white and scarlet and blue flag of Great Britain.

"A freighter of at least four thousand tons," Hatfield remarked, staring at the stranded ship.

"But, darn it, Jim, it can't be!" insisted Weston. "We're more than twenty miles from deep water. And that darn thing ain't got wheels."

Hatfield was gazing south toward distant Galveston Bay. "Cliff," he said, "I'm afraid something mighty bad has happened down there. Only a tidal wave raised by a tropical hurricane could have brought that ship up here. It must have been torn from its moorings, carried over Pelican Spit and Pelican Island and washed all the way up a bayou and over here onto the range. Remember the wind we ran into over west, two nights back? That wind was of almost gale proportions. It could very well have been the fringe of a hurricane roaring in from the Gulf."

"Reckon that must be the answer," Weston agreed. "But what happened to Galveston?"

THE tall Ranger's face grew somber. "Galveston Island nowhere has an elevation of much over eight feet," Hatfield said. "If the water got high enough to bring that big freighter up here, it must have just about swept the island clean. We'll head down that way, but first let's give that ship a closer once-over. Might be somebody on it, hurt or something. We might lend a hand. We'll ride around here and up the sag. Should be able to get to her deck on the upper side. We'll give her a once-over, then we'll head down to Galveston for a look-see."

"What about Cartinas?" Weston asked as they got under way.

"Cartinas can wait," Hatfield replied. "Reckon another day won't make much difference where that hellion is concerned."

"You really figure he has a hole-up in the Big Thicket?" Weston said.

Hatfield shrugged his broad shoulders. "Could be," he admitted. "The tip Captain McDowell got said he'd been seen around there, he and some of his bunch."

"Funny he'd be working over east this far, away from the Border," Weston commented.

"His sort is likely to be working anywhere, and holing up anywhere," Hatfield replied. "According to all reports, he has tie-ups everywhere. A man operating on the scale he does is apt to. And don't forget, the Big Thicket is a tangled forest of over two million acres, lots of it never yet explored. Anything is liable to happen there, and it is ideal for some hellion who knows the trails and how to get into it. No telling what is inside there. It's nearly a hundred and twenty miles long and, in lots of places, more than forty miles wide.

"During the Civil War, bands of service dodgers hung out there, sometimes a couple of hundred to a bunch, and defied capture. Sounds unlikely but it could be the Big Thicket is Cartinas' real headquarters, hidden away back in its depths. Anyhow, that's what we hope to find out. All right, we'll head up the sag here and slide around that water-traveling chuck wagon's bow to the upside."

They sent their horses scrambling up the steep slope, their footfall almost inaudible on the thick grass. Lounging carelessly in their saddles, they rounded the freighter's blunt bow, and jerked their mounts to an astonished halt.

A rope ladder dangled down the side of the ship. Clustered beside the ladder were nearly a dozen horsemen. A long line of laden pack mules were just starting north across the prairie.

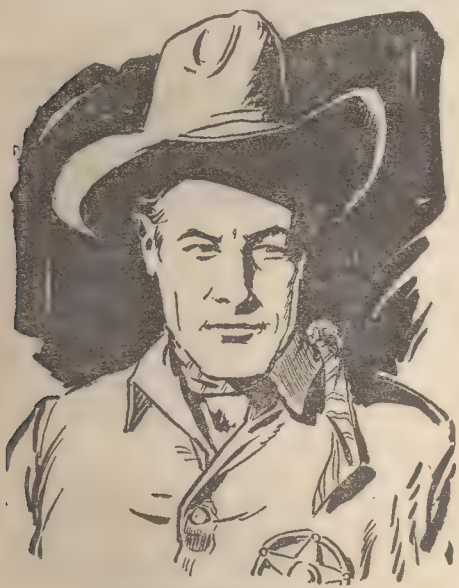
As the two Rangers came into view, a

warning shout went up, instantly followed by a roar of gunfire.

Cliff Weston pitched dead from his saddle without a groan. Jim Hatfield's hands streaked down and up. Smoke and flame gushed from the muzzles of his long-barreled Colts.

The reports blended in a veritable drum-roll of sound.

One of the grouped horsemen spun from his saddle. Another reeled sideways with



TEXAS RANGER JIM HATFIELD

a gasping yell, clutching at a blood spouting shoulder. Still another let out an agonized howl and his gun dropped from a hand that dangled loosely from a bullet broken arm.

Then the tall form of the Lone Wolf toppled slowly forward, lurched across the horn and thudded to the ground to lie with blood smeared face buried in the long grass.

A CLEAR, imperative voice rang out: "All right, get going. Never mind those two. They're done for. Pick up Tim's body and fling it across his saddle. Mustn't leave it here to be found. Somebody might recognize him. Get going before somebody else comes along. We've been mighty lucky as it is. Get going!"

The order was obeyed without question. The troop streamed after the mules, two riders slumped in their saddles, groaning and cursing fluently and looking very sick.

The dead man flopped and dangled grotesquely across the saddle of a led horse. The troop veered slightly to the east. Soon the violet line of the horizon swallowed the last mule, the level rays of the sinking sun glinting redly on its hide. Shadows crept around the bow of the stranded ship, beside which lay two motionless forms.

Far to the east the bayou water gleamed sullen crimson, then grayed and darkened as the night closed down. From a thicket came the lonely, hauntingly beautiful plaint of a hunting wolf. An owl drifted past on noiseless pinions. A night hawk swooped close, uttered its weird banshee wail and winged upward, standing out hard and clear for an instant against the white radiance of the rising moon. A faint breeze whispered the grassheads and was gone.

Then for a long time nothing blunted the sharp edge of the silence save an occasional jingle of bit irons as the patiently waiting horses tossed petulant heads.

CHAPTER II

Riders of the Night

THE great clock in the sky was wheeling toward the zenith when Jim Hatfield groaned, shuddered and rolled his blood encrusted head from side to side. Slowly he raised his face from the damp grass, then quickly dropped it again. For several moments he was frankly sick. Then, gritting his teeth, he managed to sit up, weak and trembling, but with his mind clearing. His head seemed one vast

ache, his mouth was parched, his face stiff with dried blood. He raised a shaking hand to his forehead and traced a shallow furrow above his left temple and just below the hairline.

The wound was slight, little more than a cut in the skin, but the glancing slug had struck his skull a prodigious wallop.

Despite the sting, he probed the wound with his fingers and thankfully came to the conclusion that there was no fracture, which decision was strengthened by the free flow of blood. Nor was there any numbness that might hint at concussion. Already, in fact, the headache was lessening, and with the elasticity of youth and perfect physical condition he was quickly recovering his strength.

"Blazes, but a drink would come in handy, though," he muttered. "Wonder if there's any water on that blasted ship. Should be."

He glanced toward the dangling ladder. Then with a rush came remembrance of his companion who had fallen at the first volley fired by the mysterious horsemen. He stood up, still a trifle shakily, and glanced about.

Cliff Weston was dead, a blue hole between his glazed and staring eyes. Hatfield's face turned bleak as the granite of the hills as he gazed down at the blood dabbled, youthful features, and the golden head that never would be gray. His green eyes took on a strange smoky tint, like the storm tossed waters of Galveston Bay with the hurricane roaring over it.

Otherwise, however, he showed no emotion. Wordless, he turned to where the two horses stood. He removed the bits so the animals could graze in comfort, rubbed Goldy's velvety muzzle.

"Considerable dew on the grass now, feller," he said. "Reckon you can sort of eat your drink along with your feed. Take it easy for a spell. I want to give that ship a looking over. May be able to find some water up there, anyhow."

Bestowing a final pat on poor Cliff Weston's bay, he tackled the rope ladder.

As he stepped to the silent deck, Hatfield understood to the full that there is no such ghostly loneliness as the loneliness of a deserted ship. The loading booms were as gaunt skeletons raising tortured arms to the moon. An open hatch was a gaping mouth voicing a soundless scream. The window panes of a cabin were like to the staring eyes of dead Cliff Weston. Folks were wont to say that the man a stern old Lieutenant of Rangers named the Lone Wolf had no nerves. But Jim Hatfield realized that he *did* have nerves, and that they were stretched to the breaking point.

The half-open door of the cabin drew him irresistibly, as if something within was urging him to enter. And at the same time he experienced an eerie shrinking. An insistent warning seemed to exude from the black interior. With a muttered curse he stepped forward, shoved the door back and entered the cabin.

All was black dark, for the moon, now high overhead, shot its beams straight downward and they did not pierce the murky window panes. Hatfield drew a match from his pocket and struck it. Instantly he dashed it out and leaped sideways along the wall. The quick flicker had outlined what appeared to be a man seated at a table in the middle of the room.

Tense, motionless, a cocked gun in his hand, Hatfield waited, peering and listening. No slightest sound broke the silence. There was no shadow of movement in the black dark.

CAUTIOUSLY, he fished out another match. Holding it at arm's length he struck it on the wall. The tiny flare revealed that there was a man seated at the table, slumped in his chair, bent forward so that his face and his outstretched arms rested on the table as if in sleep.

But in the brief flicker of the match, something about the sideways lolling of the head and the limpness of the arms told Hatfield that the man at the table would never more raise his face from the rough boards.

Holstering his gun, Hatfield struck a third match and held it high. Its flame revealed a brass hanging lamp swinging by

chains over the table. He stepped forward, removed the chimney and held the match to the wick. Another moment and a mellow glow flooded the cabin.

The man seated in the chair was dead. Hideous stains and blotches darkened his shirt front. There was also a dark stain on the table top. The handle of a heavy knife protruded between his shoulder blades. The point gleamed through the front of his shirt.

In life, he had been a rugged, big-featured individual. His skin had the leathery, poreless look caused by years of wind and salt water. His hair was grizzled.

Hatfield decided that he doubtless had been the captain of the freighter, and this was the captain's cabin. A sextant, a pair of dividers and other instruments of navigation were in sight. Lying on the floor was a long packing case of rough wood. The top had been ripped off and the lamplight gleamed on the barrels of several rifles packed neatly in rows.

Hatfield picked up one of the long guns. It was an excellent weapon of modern make, and brand new. The Ranger stared at it, his eyes narrowing.

Suddenly an idea struck him. He glanced about, spotted a lantern hanging on a hook. Replacing the rifle, he secured the lantern, shook it to make sure the bowl contained oil. Then he lighted it and hurried out of the cabin and to the open hatch that led to the after hold of the ship. Hooking the lantern bail over his arm, he clambered down the ladder into the cavernous gloom of the freighter's interior. When his feet touched the well deck he held the lantern high and glanced around. Packing cases similar to the one in the cabin were strewn about. Their lids had been ripped off and they were empty.

Hatfield gave a low whistle. There were more than two score of the empty cases, and he estimated that each case had contained at least a dozen rifles. His eye lighted on numerous square boxes, likewise open and empty.

"And those must have held cartridges," he muttered. "Enough repeaters and ammunition to outfit an army! No wonder those mules were loaded down. And I'm willing to bet a hatful of pesos it wasn't the first trip that train made. Juan Cartinas and his bunch, or I'm a heap mistaken. The question is, was this stuff consigned to them, or did they hit on the stranded ship by a lucky accident?"

There was other cargo in the hold, ponderous bales and crates and barrels, apparently intact and untouched by water. But where was the crew? Hatfield felt sure they had not suffered death by drowning. The ship's bulwarks were not smashed and there was nothing to indicate that water had swept her deck. Lightly loaded, she doubtless rode the crest of the tidal wave and suffered little damage.

Returning to the deck, he searched the ship from stem to stern. There was no sign of life on the vessel other from a stray rat or two that scuttled away with a pattering of tiny feet. Nor did he discover more bodies. He finally formed the conclusion that the crew members had either been on shore leave when the hurricane struck, with the exception of the dead captain or mate in the cabin, or had subsequently abandoned the vessel after she stranded on the bank.

THE forecastle showed signs of recent occupancy. There were still warm coals in the galley stove and the remains of a meal on the table. On the stove was a huge boiler half full of warm coffee. There was fuel ready to hand and Hatfield soon had a fire going and the coffee heated to the boiling point. After several steaming cups he felt much better.

The lazarette was amply provisioned and he decided that a hearty dinner wouldn't go bad. It was well past midnight and he considered there was no sense to riding off in the dark. Besides, there was a faint chance that the raiders might return for more loot. If they did, he felt that he was in a position to give them a warm reception.

To make doubly sure, however, he descended to the ground for his heavy Winchester snugged in the saddle boot. He took along a couple of blankets from the

forecastle, in which he wrapped Cliff Weston's dead body. Then he returned to the galley and threw together an appetizing meal. He ate on deck, where he could keep watch, then rolled a cigarette and considerd the situation from all angles.

If the raid on the freighter had been instigated and carried out by Juan Cartinas, the Border trouble maker, the matter was one of grave import. Cartinas could hardly have foretold the hurricane and the watery freak that had deposited the ship out on the rangeland miles from deep water, but what if the arms in the hold of the vessel had been consigned to Cartinas in the first place. Hatfield knew that tramp steamers were not above trafficking a little in contraband when it was worth their while taking the attendant risks. If the rifles had been intended for Cartinas, the Border trouble maker must have some elaborate plans in mind. Anyhow, he had the guns and their potentialities for trouble.

Juan Cartinas was little more than a name to Texas peace officers, but he had been a thorn in the flesh of Mexican authorities for quite a while before he began operating north of the River. Captain Bill McDowell considered Cartinas just another brush popping owlhoot, but Jim Hatfield was not so sure. Cartinas had a following on both sides of the Rio Grande. He occupied the role of a sort of Robin Hood, being lavish to the poor. And such a man catches the imagination of the ignorant. It had been pretty well established that Cartinas was not a Mexican; that he had taken a name with Latin intimations in order to strengthen the regard of the *peons* of the Border country. Such a man could be highly dangerous in that ever inflammable section.

But be that as it may, Cartinas had committed the ultimate depredation. He had killed a Texas Ranger. Not until he, Hatfield, was dead or Cartinas had paid the supreme penalty for his crime would the Lone Wolf give up the trail.

The presence of the weapons in the ship's hold might be the explanation of Cartinas being so far east of his usual haunts. It had been pretty conclusively established that he was hanging around the Big Thicket country. The reports that had come to Texas Rangers Post Headquarters were from reliable sources. Captain McDowell had dispatched Hatfield and Weston, the new recruit, to investigate the rumors.

After eating, Hatfield leaned on the rail and gazed across the moon silvered prairie, pondering the reports and the subsequent tragic happening. Suddenly he stiffened, pinching out his cigarette with a quick movement. He changed his position a little until he was in the shadow of one of the loading booms.

Nearly a mile to the east, a troop of horsemen were riding out of the north. In the wan glow of the moonlight, Hatfield counted a full dozen in all. He reached for his rifle that stood ready to hand and waited.

But the hard riding horsemen did not turn toward the ship. Straight south they rode toward distant Galveston Bay, silent, unreal, like ghostly phantoms of the night. Hatfield watched until the shadows swallowed them up. For a long time he stood watching, but no other sign of life quickened the desolation of the rangeland, and only the impatient yipping of a coyote broke the silence.

Finally he gave over watching. He hauled some blankets from the forecastle, spread them on the deck and stretched out, his Winchester within hand's reach. He knew that no one could approach the ship without awakening him. It was the sunlight of a new day that roused him from his slumbers.

CHAPTER III

Lawman

AFTER giving the surrounding country a careful scrutiny, he repaired to the galley and cooked and ate some breakfast. Before leaving the ship he examined

Hatfield lashed out and grabbed a corded wrist before the knife could strike home

the body in the cabin. The dead man's pockets revealed nothing of significance. But mingled with the blood stains on the table was another and darker stain that Hatfield deduced was made by spilled ink.

"Looks as if the steamship captain might have been writing something when he was killed," he mused. He proceeded to go over the cabin with meticulous care. The door of a big iron safe in the corner, he decided, had been forced. Not that there was anything remarkable about that. The raiders would hardly have overlooked the possibility of the strongbox containing something of worth.

But there was no sign of pen, paper or ink in the cabin, aside from a bottle of drawing ink, tightly corked, that had doubtless been used for purposes of navigation.

Hatfield thought it inadvisable to remove the knife from the body, but he did examine the handle closely.

"A home-made affair, worked out of a blacksmith's file," he decided. "Feller that used it must have a powerful arm to drive it clean through the poor devil's body that way. Well, looks like I've done all I can here. Might as well get going and pack poor Weston's body to the sheriff's office, if he's got one left."

A little later he got under way, leading

Weston's horse with its grisly burden roped to the saddle. Now and then he caught a flash from the distant Trinity River, gleaming in the early autumn sunshine.

As he progressed, Hatfield saw evidence of the storm's fury. Trees were uprooted, bushes flattened. Great gullies had been scoured out and the grass showed signs of having been in contact with salt water. Hatfield shook his head gloomily, and dreaded what was ahead.

But he was not prepared for the horrible scene of devastation that met his eyes as he neared the bay. As he learned afterward, the water had risen four feet in as many seconds and had swept completely over Galveston Island. Some sections along the Gulf were entirely bare. Others were covered with great hills of splintered timbers, twisted roofs and battered human bodies. Fifteen hundred acres of houses had been destroyed. Huge pyres kindled on the sand smoked and smouldered, cremating the bodies for which burial was impossible. Everywhere was death, destruction and despair.

But the stricken city, living up to its motto, *Yo Solo* (I Alone), was already bringing order out of chaos. A department of safety was efficiently functioning until martial law could be established. A relief committee had been organized and all able-bodied survivors had been impressed for the task of finding and caring for the injured, and cleaning up the city. The Spirit of the Alamo, Golidad and San Jacinto was abroad in the land and Texans were winning another grim battle, in the Texas tradition.

Hatfield, after considerable difficulty and delay, managed to get himself and the horses conveyed to the island by a small lighter. He found the courthouse, which was little damaged by the storm, hunted up the sheriff, an old frontier peace-officer with a lined and haggard face. To him he delivered the body of Ranger Cliff Weston, along with an account of the happenings of the previous day and night. He refrained from revealing his own Ranger connections.

SADLY the peace-officer shook his head. "It's a strange yarn, cowboy," said the sheriff, with a puzzled air, "but after what's happened here, nothing surprises me. So that's where that darn ship got to, eh? She's listed as missin', and we figured she was sunk or drifted out to sea. I'll get the information on her crew and manifest later. And you figure the hellions who gunned you were Cartinas and his bunch? Could be, I reckon. Especially atfer what happened here along toward mornin', as if we didn't have enough trouble."

"How's that?" Hatfield asked, for the sheriff's remark was significant.

"A bunch of sidewinders busted into a bank," replied the sheriff. "All the banks are guarded. I had two special deputies at that one. We found the deputies this mornin', or what was left of 'em. Each had a knife stuck in his back. Must have been a regular giant who handled those knives. The blades went clean through those poor devils."

Hatfield's eyes narrowed. "Did you take a good look at the knives?" he asked.

The sheriff nodded. "Home-made affairs, hammered from big files," he answered. "But you see lots of that sort in the Border country. Used for throwin'. Why?"

"Because," Hatfield replied quietly, "I figure it ties the bank robbery with the bunch who gunned us up there by the ship. The man in the cabin had a home-made knife driven clean through his body. Yes, undoubtedly the same bunch. It was them I saw riding south last night."

"Begins to look that way," admitted the sheriff. "We've had some lootin' here in town since the storm—that was to be expected. But last night was the first thing that looked like a planned job."

"How was the vault opened?" Hatfield asked. "Did they blow it?"

"No," the sheriff replied. "It was forced. They used wedges and pries. A plumb slick job. The sort that can be done without makin' any noise to speak of."

"The method used on the ship's safe," Hatfield nodded. "Yes, there's no doubt

about it. The same bunch. But I don't consider it likely that the whole band I saw riding down here crossed the channel to town. That would have required too many boats and would certainly have attracted attention. Just two or three men slipped across, I'd say, leaving the others over on the mainland to wait for them. A salty outfit, all right, and one with brains."

"Reckon you're right," the sheriff agreed wearily.

"And," Hatfield predicted, "I wouldn't be a mite surprised if they made another try for something. Easy pickings here, now, for a bunch that is able to get the lowdown on things."

Again the sheriff voiced gloomy agreement. "And stoppin' them is goin' to be a tough chore," he said. "Things are a mess here. We're just beginnin' to pull out of it. There's so much to do a feller can't keep an eye on everything.

"Well, if you hanker for somethin' to eat, there's a soup kitchen operatin' around the corner. I'll give you a note. We are doin' a pretty good chore of feedin' folks. Places for 'em to sleep is the big trouble. It don't matter to fellers like you and me who are used to poundin' our ears in the open, but it's almighty tough on women and kids, and we got plenty of both who lost their homes.

"Fact is, we figure there must be at least eight thousand homeless right now. The courthouse is filled with cots and beddowns, and so's the jail, and every other buildin' that's standin'. All right, go get yourself some grub. There's a stable in the alley just beyond the soup kitchen. It's still in one piece and I expect you can get a stall there for your horse. I keep my critter there. Ain't many left. The haymow is full of cots, but there ain't room for 'em in the stalls.

"Tell old Gibson, the stablekeeper, I sent you. I'll take care of this poor feller's carcass and notify the Ranger post. Should be some Rangers here in a day or two, I figure, though I reckon McDowell ain't got many to spare, what with the trouble along the Border farther west. They say somethin' is buildin' up below the Line. Wouldn't be surprised if that outlaw Cartinas had a hand in whatever's goin' on. Drop in again after you get something to eat."

THE sheriff speculated Hatfield's tall form as he passed through the door.

"Now where have I seen that big man before?" he asked himself, tugging at his mustache. "Or if I ain't ever seen him, I've sure heard tell of somebody what looks like him. Wish I could remember just where. It was something interesting, all right. Golly, but he's a whopper! Way over six feet tall, and broad in proportion. And them funny-colored eyes. Never seed eyes that shade of green before. They seem to go right through you. Bet that owlhoot bunch is lickin' some sore paws about now. He just said he swapped lead with 'em a mite before they downed him, but when that sort thumbs a hammer, somebody gets hurt."

Hatfield located the soup kitchen without difficulty and obtained a bite to eat. Then he stabled his horse.

"Finest lookin' cayuse I ever clapped eyes on," declared the stablekeeper, a broken-down former cowhand with cold blue eyes and a hard mouth. "I'll look after him proper, and you'll find him here when you want him. I got a double-barreled sawed-off that says so."

After making sure that all Goldy's wants were cared for, Hatfield returned to the sheriff's office. The old lawman motioned him to a chair and for some moments sat regarding him in silence.

"Chuck line ridin', cowboy?" he asked at length.

"Sort of," Hatfield replied. "I was just kind of passing through (which was perfectly true) till after what happened up there by the ship. Decided after that I might stick around for a mite."

"Yes, reckon it hit you a jolt, havin' that poor young feller die right alongside of you," nodded the sheriff.

Sheriff Frank Morton was startled at the effect of his remark. Abruptly the sternly handsome face of the man seated across the table from him became bleak

as chiseled granite. The sunny green of the long eyes changed to a cold and smoky gray, and in their depths was a hard, pale glitter like to unsheathed dagger points under a wintry sun.

"Never saw anything like it," the sheriff later confided to Hank Jasper, his chief deputy. "It was like all of a sudden there was another feller sittin' there 'stead of the one I'd been talkin' to. And them eyes! They give me the creeps."

But all Hatfield said in answer to the sheriff's observation was a quiet, "Yes."

"So you aim to stick around a spell," the sheriff said, after he had somewhat recoverd his composure. "Well, we sure need men, of the right sort, I been lookin' you over, son, and sort of like what I see. How'd you like to sign up as one of my specials for a while? We've got trouble on our hands, and I'm scaired we're due for more. Yes, I can use a feller like you."

Hatfield sat silent for a moment. "Okay," he said at length. "I'll sign up."

"Fine," said the sheriff. "I'll swear you in and give you a badge. Hold up your right hand."

The sheriff mumbled a few words, fished a shiny deputy sheriff's badge from a drawer and handed it to the Lone Wolf. Hatfield slipped it in his pocket. The sheriff shot him a keen glance but did not comment.

"Okay, you're a peace-officer now," he said. "If you catch some horned-toad doin' somethin' off color, shoot him. Don't bother to make an arrest. We ain't got no room in the jail for prisoners."

HATFIELD'S lips twitched slightly as he listened to this rather unorthodox method of law enforcement, but he only nodded reply.

"Getting late, I think I'll drift around a bit and look things over," he said, standing up and stretching his long arms above his head, his finger tips almost touching the ceiling.

"Not a bad notion," agreed the sheriff. "I'm goin' to drift around a bit myself in a little while. I'll be back here later, if you happen to want me for something."

Leaving the office, Hatfield picked his way through the wreckage strewn streets. Everywhere was frightful desolation, but everywhere, too, folks were working like beavers to recondition the stricken city. Curious glances were cast at the tall, broad-shouldered man in rangeland garb as he sauntered along, his steady eyes missing nothing of what went on around him.

Gradually, as evening drew near, Hatfield worked his way toward the waterfront. He paused beside one of the smouldering pyres on the sands.

"Gettin' rid of 'em," a fire tender told him. "A tough chore, cowboy. For all I know some of my best friends are in that heap. So smashed up nobody could recognize 'em. We first piled 'em on barges and towed 'em out into the Gulf and dumped 'em. But next day the tides had brought most of 'em back and scattered 'em along the beach. So we decided the only thing to do was burn 'em. No time for diggin' graves. Uh-huh, a tough chore, but the only way to handle it."

Hatfield nodded sympathetically and passed on.

The harbor was already filled with ships that had hurried in from every direction, bringing food, medicine, tools and supplies. Wallowing oil tankers, trim passenger ships, blunt British freighters, bustling, self-important tugs vied for space.

Along the waterfront surged a cosmopolitan company. Stolid, slow-moving Cornishmen, swarthy, panther-like Lascars, blond Scandinavians and dark Italians rubbed shoulders with the busy town folks. Here were sailors of every nationality, port and clime. There was a perfect babble of tongues and a swirling, restless activity.

One grimy tramp steamer riveted Hatfield's attention. Despite her battered plates, her salt encrusted stack and her littered deck, there was a trim and sleek rakishness to her lines that caused her to stand out amid the heterogeneous swarm of craft.

"Speed there," Hatfield mused. "Chances she's over-engined way out of the ordinary. Wonder where she came from? Flies the American flag, but that doesn't mean much. Her sort sails under any registry that's convenient at the moment, so long as they can get away with it."

Everything along the waterfront had been flattened, but already a low, ramshackle building had been thrown together on the sands and it housed, as was to be expected—a saloon. In the tradition of the frontier settlement, gold strike or trading post. As an old-timer once said,

"Whisky, cards and women won the West."

And the sinister looking shack promised all three in profusion. From its glassless windows, through which poured golden bars of light to stab the deepening dusk, came a blaring of music, or what was intended for it. Inside sounded the clink of bottle necks on glasses, the whir and click of a roulette wheel, a babble of voices and a thumping of boots on a rough dance floor. Somebody with a passion for conformity had hinged swinging doors into place.

Hatfield decided to give the place an inspection and pushed his way through the swinging doors.

AS WAS to be expected, the majority of the gathering were seafarers. But Hatfield was rather surprised to see, seated at a corner table, three men in rangeland garb. They were lean, alert looking men with their broad-brimmed hats drawn low over their eyes. Cowhands, anyone would say from a casual glance.

Their table companion was a massively built, rather short man with long, gorilla-like arms. He had a square head, a bull neck and a big-featured face from which gazed keen-looking eyes of clear blue. His appearance smacked of the sea, but there was something illusive and indefinite about him. Hatfield had a feeling that he would be at home in any company and adaptable to any circumstance or environment. His hands, lying loosely on the table top, were long fingered and finely formed.

As Hatfield sauntered along the rough bar, one of the men in cow country clothes glanced up absently. His gaze fixed on the Ranger's face, he started visibly and his eyes widened. Almost instantly, however, he relaxed and made a casual remark to his companions. Hatfield caught a glint of eyes in his direction. But there was no turning of heads and the group went on talking among themselves. It seemed to the Ranger that their indifference to his presence was just a little too deliberate.

"Feller acted almost like he knew me, and didn't expect to see me," Hatfield decided as he located a vacant table and sat down, where he could study the group at the table without appearing to do so. He noted that half a dozen obvious seamen occupied a table adjoining that at which the oddly assorted four sat. They were a salty looking bunch with corded arms, bare to the elbow, tarred fingers, sheath knives at their hips. The big, square-headed man turned to speak to them. Doubtless they were all from the

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same ship. Hatfield's thoughts instinctively turned to the trim-lined tramp in the harbor.

"Just the kind of a bunch you'd expect from that kind of a ship," he mused as he gave his order to the frowsy looking waiter.

CHAPTER IV

Killers Strike

WHILE he sipped the drink the waiter brought him, Hatfield studied the gathering in the room.

Rough, quarrelsome, but comparatively harmless for the most part, was his decision. Blue water men in for a bust, callously indifferent to the tragedy all about them. But, then, tragedy was their everyday fare. The two groups at the tables in the corner, he somehow felt, were different. There was something about them that set them apart from the honest sailors who squabbled amicably among themselves, downed their drinks and swapped tall yarns.

Abruptly two of the sailors got up and sauntered out, glancing neither to right nor left. The four remaining at the table drew their heads together in low voiced conversation. The three cowhands and their companion appeared oblivious to the departure of the two. Again Hatfield felt their casual air was a trifle too elaborate.

Hatfield had intended to give the saloon a once-over and then leave. But the two groups intrigued him and he decided to stick around a while and await possible developments. What those developments might be, he had not the slightest notion, but long experience warned him that events were in the making. He ordered another drink and relaxed comfortably in his chair, apparently absorbed in the various activities of the place but in reality never losing sight of the two groups in the corner.

Another half hour passed and Hatfield considered leaving. Doubtless his feeling about the whole business was due to the depressing effect of the stricken city on his nerves.

And then suddenly the two groups got up from their tables and headed for the door, the big square-headed man and the sailors leading, the three apparent cowhands lagging behind somewhat.

Without the slightest preliminary warning the attempt was made. The cowhands whirled, hands flashing to their holsters. But even faster, Jim Hatfield slewed sideways from his chair. His guns were out before the three cleared leather.

Back and forth across the room gushed red flashes of flame. The hanging lamps quivered to the thunder of the reports. The place was a screaming, cursing pandemonium as men dived wildly to get out of line with the flying lead. The square-headed man and the sailors nearly tore the swinging doors from their hinges as they went through them. Powder smoke swirled and eddied, smashing furniture and breaking bottles added to the uproar. The dance floor women were screeching like lost souls. Their partners were under tables or behind posts. A fat man got stuck in one of the glassless windows and added his yells of woe to the uproar. A brawny longshoreman kicked him through and followed in his wake, head first.

Back to the wall, a smoking gun in each hand, Jim Hatfield peered through the powder reek at the two figures sprawled on the floor near the bar. He blurred one gun into its sheath and held up his deputy sheriff's badge for all to see. His voice cut through the tumult like a silver blade through clabber.

"Up against the bar, everybody!" he thundered. "Move!"

The crowd "moved." That yawning black gun muzzle seemed to single out every man in the room for immediate and personal attention. Within seconds there was a dense huddle packed against the bar.

Hatfield stepped forward a few paces. His icy gaze swept over the crowd.

"Who owns this place?" he demanded. "Step up!"

A WHITE-FACED man in store clothes disengaged himself from the huddle. His eyes were wild, his hands shaking.

"I didn't have nothin' to do with it, Officer," he babbled. "I don't want no trouble in my place."

The Lone Wolf's cold eyes focused on his face.

"If you don't want me to close this rat hole within three minutes, talk," he said. "Who were those men who just went through the door?"

"I don't know," the saloon owner replied. "They must be off one of the ships. They came in a couple of hours back and sat down together. Didn't do nothing. Been behaving themselves all evening."

"And who are those two gents there on the floor?" Hatfield asked, gesturing with his gun barrel toward the motionless bodies of the cowhands.

The saloonkeeper wet his dry lips with his tongue. His eyes shifted away.

"Better keep on talking," Hatfield warned.

The man shambled a few steps closer. He lowered his voice, his eyes shifting from side to side in a frightened manner.

"I don't know for sure," he said, "but accordin' to what I was told a little while ago, you just killed two of Juan Cartinas' men. You know what that means."

"I'd say," Hatfield replied, "that it means the earth is somewhat cleaner than it was five minutes back. That is if you know what you're talking about. What makes you think they belonged to the Cartinas bunch?"

"A feller who was in here said so," replied the saloonkeeper. "He said he knew 'em. He left right after tellin' me. Said trouble busted loose where any of that bunch showed up and he didn't want to be here when it happened. I figured he didn't know what he was talkin' about, but I reckon he did."

Hatfield studied the man, decided he was telling the truth.

"All right," he said. "You slipped up by not relaying that information to the sheriff's office pronto, but I'll pass it by this time. Now you hustle out and find Sheriff Morton. Tell him what happened and bring him back here with you. Tell him one of his deputies is here waiting for him. Get going."

The saloonkeeper hurried out. At that moment from the harbor sounded a wild screeching of whistles and indignant bellowings. Hatfield hurried out after the saloonkeeper. He flung a warning over his shoulder to the crowd at the bar:

"You fellers stay put till I get back. I don't want to meet any of you coming out when I come back in."

The men, feeling Jim's authority, nodded glumly.

The harbor was a scene of confusion as wild as that of the saloon a few minutes before. A grimy tramp steamer was swinging around in a wide circle and threatening momentary disaster to other shipping. Black smoke streaked with steam poured from her thundering funnel. Her propellor lashed the water to foam and a white froth billowed out on either side of her sharp prow. She scraped the paint from a British freighter, clashed her plates against those of a trim passenger ship and knifed across the bow of a screeching tug. No lights burning, she roared out to sea, swiftly vanishing in the darkness.

Hatfield gazed after the departing vessel. "So the two who left first high-tailed aboard to tell the engine room crew to get up steam and stand by," he muttered. "She trailed her twine soon as the other five hit the deck. Thought there was something off-color about her when I first spotted her. Looks like I flushed a whole nest of sidewinders."

His black brows drawing together, he returned to the saloon. The crowd was still clustered about the bar. Hatfield nodded to them in a friendly fashion.

"Okay," he said. "I figure you fellers didn't have anything to do with the ruckus. Go on about your business. A couple of you pack those bodies over to the wall, out of the way."

TWO brawny seamen quickly obeyed the order, shunting the bodies to one side as indifferently as if they had been a bit of cargo that required moving. The crowd quickly scattered. The normal activities of the place resumed and soon it was as if nothing had happened.

Hatfield went back to his table, resumed his chair and ordered another drink from an obsequious waiter. He was smoking quietly and sipping his drink when the sheriff hurried in, the saloonkeeper trotting at his heels.

The room stilled as Morton swept the crowd with his cold eyes. But the sheriff, with a shrug of his shoulders, sat down at the table and regarded Hatfield.

"Something happened, eh?" he remarked.

"Sort of," Hatfield admitted, taking a leisurely draw at his cigarette.

The sheriff's glance wandered to the bodies lying against the wall, came back to the imperturbable Lone Wolf.

"Persinger, who owns this rumhole, told me those two gents and another of the same sort just spun around and started throwin' lead at you for no reason, so far as he could see," the sheriff said. "What you figure it's all about?"

"Looks like somebody doesn't like me," Hatfield replied.

"That ain't no answer," snorted the sheriff. "Things like that ain't done just for fun. Why did they do it?"

"Well," Hatfield said, "I'd say that one or more of those gents took part in that shindig by the stranded ship, up on the range, and recognized me when I stepped in here. One of them sure acted like it, though he tried to cover up. Persinger 'lowed those fellers belonged to Juan Cartinas' bunch."

The sheriff swore luridly. "Wouldn't be a mite surprised," he said. "And one of 'em got away?"

"Yes, along with that bunch from the ship that hightailed out of the harbor like a scared hound in a thunder storm."

"Think he went along with the ship?"

"That's what I hope to find out, now that you're here," Hatfield replied. "Suppose we find out what we can about those two gents by the wall, and then go outside and see what we can learn."

The only thing of significance the two bodies revealed was a surprisingly large sum of money.

"The devils have been doing well by themselves," growled the sheriff. "They never collared this much dinero swinging a rope."

"And their hands show they haven't twirled a twine in many a day," Hatfield said. "Nor handled a branding iron, either, though there are marks to prove they once did. And notice the callouses on the thumbs and first fingers. These gents practiced the draw considerable. Got to be pretty fast, too."

"But evidently not quite fast enough," grunted the sheriff. "Persinger said a couple of irons just growed in your hands."

Hatfield smiled, but did not otherwise comment. "Suppose we go outside and scout around a bit?" he suggested.

The sheriff called Persinger, the badly worried owner, and gave him instructions for disposing of the two bodies. Then he and Hatfield left the saloon together, to the accompaniment of curious glances and a respectful silence that lasted until they had passed through what was left of the swinging doors.

OUTSIDE, knots of sailors and longshoremen were still discussing the departure of the mysterious vessel. The sheriff beckoned a man he knew.

"Did you see them fellers get on that ship, Blount?" he asked.

"Sure did," Blount replied. "I was standin' right about here when the shootin' started in the saloon. Then them five fellers came tearing along like the devil was after them. There was a dinghy right up alongside the wharf, with two men laying on the oars. Them five fellers dropped into the dinghy. The big short one bellered an order and that dinghy went through the water so fast it smoked. She slammed up alongside that tramp steamer and the whole bunch went scooting up her

side. Before the last one hit the deck her screw was turning. They didn't hoist the dinghy, and they must have slipped her mud hook. They sure didn't take time to hoist that, either. Then away she went."

"Was there a feller in cow country clothes with 'em?" the sheriff asked.

Blount shook his head. "Them fellers were all seamen," he replied. "I didn't see no cowboys."

"But I did," broke in a little red-haired fellow with a badly puffed and discolored eye. "I saw him, and felt him, too. I was standin' back a ways and saw them seamen go over the side. A minute later that swab dressed like a cowboy came scuddin' along with all sails set and drawing. He caught me amidships and set me on my beam ends and stepped on my head. Look at my bloomin' eye. I'd have slid my sheath knife into the blighter, but before I could get topsides again, he was hull down in the dark and out of sight."

"Which way did he go?" asked the sheriff.

The red-head gestured to the right.

"Didn't turn off into town?"

"Nope," said the red-head. "He was holdin' a straight course."

"Sticking to the waterfront, evidently," Hatfield observed. "I'd say he intended to cross to the mainland."

"Chances are," the sheriff agreed. "There are lots of small craft plying back and forth between the island and the mainland. Plenty of stuff coming across. He wouldn't have any trouble getting passage."

"Let's see what we can learn," said Hatfield. With a word of thanks to Blount and the red-head, they moved on, pausing from time to time to question the owners of the various small craft hugging the remains of the wharf.

For some time they had no luck, but finally they got a break. They paused to question the owner of a lighter that was just pulling in.

"Uh-huh, I ferried a feller and his horse across," said the man. "Just getting back. Uh-huh, I'd say he was a cowboy. Mean

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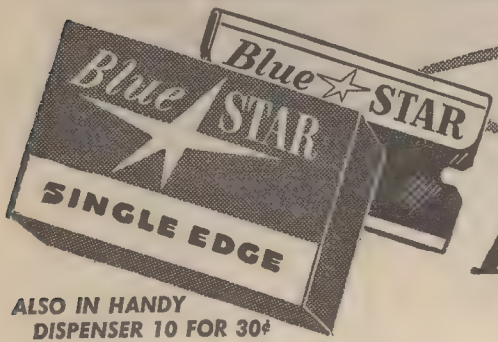

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lookin' feller with blood on his face. Seemed in one helluva hurry. I told him I didn't aim to make another trip across tonight. Next second I was looking into a gun muzzle. I changed my mind."

"Where'd he go after he got to shore?" asked the sheriff.

"Don't ask me," replied the ferryman. "He piled onto his horse and rode, that's all I know. I didn't ask no questions with him setting there with his hand on that gun. I was glad to see the last of him."

"Did he ride north?" Hatfield asked.

THE barge-man shook his head. "Nope, he was headin' east along the shore when I last saw him," he replied. "Of course, he might have turned north later. There's a trail that runs north to Beaumont, about a mile or so to the east. He might have been headin' for that."

Sheriff Morton swore angrily. "Now what?" he asked Hatfield.

"Well," the Lone Wolf replied, with the suspicion of a grin. "It looks like this gent and his rowers will be late to bed. I'm getting my horse and this boatman can haul me across to the mainland. Can't trail that hellion in the dark, but I'll ride on a piece and curl up under a tree till morning. No place in town to sleep, anyhow. See if you can round up some coffee and bacon or something, and some bread. I'll stow 'em in my saddle-pouch so I can throw together something to eat a little later."

"I'll get 'em," said the sheriff. "Plenty of chuck in town now, thank Pete. Anyhow, folks won't go hungry."

"You stay right here," he told the lighterman. "Sorry to keep you from your rest—reckon you need it—but this business is important."

"I'll be glad to, Sheriff," said the man. "I'd like to see that gun pointing gent behind bars. I don't take kind to being threatened like that. Glad to do anything I can to help."

"Good man," grunted the sheriff. He turned to Hatfield.

"Where do you figure that feller headed for?" he asked.

"I'd say," Hatfield replied slowly, "the Big Thicket country."

"And you aim to follow him? As a deputy sheriff, you don't pack any authority up there. It's out of Galveston county."

"I aim to pack enough," Hatfield answered.

The sheriff regarded him shrewdly a moment, then nodded. "Yes, I've a notion you do," he said. "When I send that poor young feller's body to the Ranger post, I'll mention to Bill McDowell that I met you."

"Not a bad notion," Hatfield replied with a smile. "Now if you'll round up that chuck for me, I'll get going. I'll ride straight north, which is a shorter cut than the Beaumont trail."

Two hours later, Jim Hatfield was riding north from the stricken city whose gallant inhabitants were already planning a new and greater city that would be forever safe against a recurrence of the disaster and able to defy the elements to do their worst.

CHAPTER V

The Dark Empire

SINCE the night was clear and balmy, Hatfield holed up in a thicket and with his saddle for a pillow slept soundly until dawn. With the speed of an old campaigner, he cooked an appetizing breakfast from the provisions provided by Sheriff Morton. He was in the saddle again as the first rays of morning sunlight smoldered the prairie with a myriad shades of green.

All day long he rode steadily and again slept in the open, thankful that the weather remained fine. Around noon the next day, he forded the Trinity River and before him lay the vast desolation of the Big Thicket.

Hatfield knew that the Big Thicket was neither swamp nor marshland, but dry

and rich soil that provided sustenance for monstrous growths that formed an almost impenetrable jungle. Nearly every variety of pine and hardwood peculiar to the latitude was to be found there. Vines, creepers and shrubs abounded, their blossoms running the scale of the spectrum. There were rare ferns, some of them six feet tall, and many varieties of orchids. The streams, lakes and pot holes were bordered with wild flags and iris, white and red lilies, hyacinths and cat-tails. Palmettos grew to a height of eight to ten feet before the fronds began. The more common variety formed a knee-high mass of tossing green.

Like a dark cloud, this vast forest of tangled growth lay against the northeastern skyline, its infinite facets taking form as he drew nearer its ominous fringe.

Hatfield's face was grave as he approached this Dark Empire of outlandish tradition, weird legend and uncanny folklore. Here once slunk the Cat People of the Indians, mewing beneath the moon. Here, too, prowled the Andastes, that mystic priesthood that emulated the beasts, wearing the masks of wolf, bear and lion. Here was the lodge of the Ghost Ambassadors, who represented the peoples who no longer were, but who yet watched from the dark beyond the dark.

The coming of the White Man and the Negro did not banish the beliefs, only changed and embroidered them. The Big Thicket retained its baneful sway over the imagination of all. Colored mammies frightened children with tales of Old Coffinhead, the giant rattlesnake, "who was so old he'd done growed whiskers." Hunters and trappers spoke in hushed voices of the ghost of the Weeping Woman, who haunts a tree and protests to passersby about having been buried beside her husband's relatives. To touch that tree is to die before sunset.

Down through the years came many tales of lost travelers, of sudden and sinister disappearances, of murders and other crimes committed.

And yet, men lived in the Thicket, drawn there by some unexplainable fascination exerted by its mysterious depths. Scattered within its tangle were the cleared places of settlers who waged a constant and bitter fight against its rapid and encroaching growth. Also the lonely huts and cabins of hunters and trappers, and the hidden refuges of hunted men who found doubtful sanctuary there.

It was upon the fact that men did live in the Thicket that Hatfield based his hope of running down the man he was trailing. Who, he felt sure, was a member of the Cartinas bunch, and who might unwittingly or unwillingly lead him to the owlhoot's hole-up, be it here in the Big Thicket or somewhere in the Border country to the southwest.

He knew no stranger could enter the Thicket without being noted by someone of the dwellers in its outskirts. And although the inhabitants of the region were not addicted to loose talking, he hoped to be able to gather information in one way or another.

ALL the afternoon Hatfield rode slowly along the edge of the great wilderness, splashing through streams, skirting ponds and small lakes, listening to the cry of waterfowl and the booming of giant bullfrogs.

The sun was sinking in sullen splendor in a sky that gave promise of a stormy night when he drew near the shores of a small, lonely lake that armed back into the dark tangle of the Thicket. Overhead were square and triangle and line of flying waterfowl with flashes of crimson and gold and the lurid stain of blood. The dark waters of the lake mirrored back the chromatic blaze of the heavens as the walls of growth darkened with the curdling shadows of evening.

Hatfield had almost given up hope of spotting a human habitation before the dark closed down. He had refrained from entering the Thicket, for he knew that the most experienced and woodwise traveler could easily get hopelessly lost in its mazes. His plan was to, if possible, procure a guide who knew something of the web of trails, most of the mere game

tracks, that traversed the wilderness. Failing in this objective, he would make a try at going it alone, a hazardous undertaking under any circumstances, especially so with the prospect of encountering a band of ruthless killers who were doubtless familiar with the section.

The darkening sky decided him to seek some sort of shelter amid the growth, so he turned north and followed the shore of the arm of the lake that stretched back into the Thicket. Almost at once he noted that the track he was following had been traveled recently. There were the marks of horses' hoofs scoring the ground. Also narrower prints that he quickly identified as having been made by a mule. Less than a mile along the lake shore the tracks separated. The horse prints continued along the shore. The narrower mule tracks, which were fresher, diagonaled off to the left.

After a moment's hesitation, Hatfield decided to follow the mule tracks. Another quarter of a mile of brushing through the encroaching ferns and palmettos and he uttered an exclamation of satisfaction. Snugged in a thicket and almost invisible was a small log cabin with a split-pole roof. A cheerful spiral of blue smoke rose from the stick-and-mud chimney. A strengthening wind carried the smoke westward, which explained why he had not smelled it.

"Looks like we mightn't have to sleep out in the rain, after all, feller," he told Goldy. "Looks like a lean-to stable in back of that shack. Reckon the mule we've been following holes up there. Now let's see who owns this digging."

He raised his voice in a shout, pulling to a halt a score of yards from the closed door of the cabin.

A moment of silence followed, then the door opened and an elderly colored man stepped out. His wooly thatch was sprinkled with gray and he had a lined, kindly face. He waved his hand in greeting.

"Come a-runnin', boss," he called.

"Light off and cool your saddle," he added as Hatfield drew near. "You can put your pony in the shed behind the house, 'long with Samantha, my mule. Plenty of oats in the bin. And, if you don't mind settin' at table with a black man, there's a prime helpin' of ribs and cawn pone in the oven."

"Thank you," Hatfield replied. "My stomach was beginning to think my throat had done been sewed up."

"We'll soon fix that," said the colored man, his teeth showing white in a friendly grin. "Your name's put big in the pot. You can just get ready to bust your buttons."

"Fine!" Hatfield said. "I'll put up my horse and be right with you."

"Spring where you can water him is just a hop and a skip up the path," said the other. "My name's Jethro, suh, Jethro Wills."

HATFIELD supplied his own name and they shook hands. Then the Ranger led Goldy to the spring, which was about a hundred yards from the cabin by way of a path that wound through the thick growth. Returning to the shed behind the cabin, he stalled Goldy beside an amiable looking mule and filled his manger with oats from the bin. Then he entered the cabin, bending his tall head to pass through the doorway.

"Man, they sure needs to put ceilin's high where you hang out, Marse Hatfield," chuckled old Jethro. "There's a pan and soap and towels over in the corner, and water in the bucket. Soon as you are ready, we'll set down. Them ribs have sure got a powerful invitin' smell, and the cawn pone is plumb done and crusty."

The roasted spare ribs and the corn pone, washed down with numerous cups of steaming coffee, were all that had been promised for them. Full dark had fallen when Hatfield, with a deep sigh of content, rolled a cigarette. Jethro Wills hauled out a black old pipe and stuffed it with blacker tobacco. For some time black man and white smoked in comfortable silence, while the wind whispered through the palmettos and a whippoorwill voiced its plaintive cry.

"A lonely spot you picked to build your cabin, Jethro," Hatfield remarked at length.

"I didn't built it," Jethro returned. "It was built by a wanderin' man of the roads, years and years back. Long before I was bawn. My old pappy told me about him. Said he was a great big, fierce lookin' man who never talked to nobody. It was my pappy who found his corpse, sixty and six years ago. Found him hangin' to that old staple up there above the door. Yes, suh, he'd done hanged himself. Pappy was a young feller then, and a big strappin' man himself. Pappy got caught riled and he gives that door a good shove. It swings open and the first thing Pappy sees was a foot."

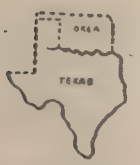
"A foot?"

"Uh-huh, a foot. A foot just hangin' loose in the air. Gives Pappy considerable of a start. But when he steps inside, he gets a heap more of a start. There was the wanderin' man of the roads, hangin' dead."

"And what did your father do?" Hatfield asked.

"Well," said Jethro, "Pappy never was scared of dead folks. He always said dead folks couldn't hurt nobody, even if they

TEXAS SETTLEMENTS



THE OPTIMISM OR PESSIMISM of the early pioneers can be measured by the names they gave their settlements. Scan a detailed map of Texas and you will find, on the bright side, towns named: Utopia, Blessing, Joy, Sublime, Paradise and Loving. But there were settlers not so pleased with their lot and so you will also find names like Mud, Sand, Grit, Clay, Rockdale and Moody.

Then the foreign flavor creeps in, with towns named Italy, Palestine, Moscow, Paris, Corsicana, Trinidad, Pasadena, Port Arthur, Victoria, Naples, Atlanta, Saratoga, Turkey, and so on almost endlessly.

in a bad storm and was hereabouts. He knowed of this cabin and figured he could maybe get in for the night, though that wanderin' man didn't hanker for company.

"But Pappy figured a little ruckus with him wouldn't be so bad as sleepin' out in one of the storms that hit here sometimes. And he was a big tough young feller himself. So he walks up to the door, through the wind and the rain, with the lightnin' flashin' all around and the thunder rollin'. He walks up and knocks, and don't get no answer, though he can see a light through the window. So he knocks harder. No answer. He hits the door a real hard thump with his big fist. And the door swings open a little and stops, like somebody was holdin' it."

Jethro paused to relight his pipe, his brown eyes twinking at the interest shown by his listener.

"Yes, just like somebody was holdin' it," he repeated. "Well, Pappy got sort of wanted to, and he figured they wouldn't want to anyhow. You see, Pappy was a soldier in the war and saw plenty of folks die. Pappy just cut the poor feller down and laid him on his bed and folded his hands decent like. Then he cooks himself some supper and said a prayer for the dead man and went to sleep. Next mornin' he buried him out under the big pine tree."

"I've a notion your pappy was a regular feller," Hatfield remarked.

A WIDE display of white teeth greeted this remark.

"Yes, suh, he was all of that," Jethro agreed. "Pappy wasn't married in them days and he didn't have no set place to live. Did a lot of huntin' and trappin' in the thicket. So, seein' as the wanderin' man didn't have nobody, Pappy figures he might as well take over the cabin. Which he did. Later on he got married and I come along. I was born right here

in this cabin. Pappy was a hard worker and made a good livin'. He sent me to school so I learned to read and write and figure. He died, and Mammy died, and now the wanderin' man of the roads has company out there under the pine tree. I lived on here and, like Pappy, I make my livin' huntin' and trappin' and fishin' and sometimes guidin' folks in the Thicket. Yes, it's lonesome here, but I don't mind. I never was afraid of ha'ants or the goblins and things some folks say lives in the Thicket. 'Bout the only thing that ever shows up around here that bothers me some is the Ghost Riders."

"The Ghost Riders?"

"Uh-huh, that's what folks livin' over t'other side the lake calls 'em. But I don't believe they're ghosts or any other kind of ha'ants. If I thought they was, I wouldn't pay 'em no mind. I 'member Pappy tellin' about how back in the war days, gangs of mighty bad men used to hang out in the Thicket. To my mind, them Ghost Riders fellers are some of that sort. And that sort's a heap worse than any ha'ants that ever went prowlin' around in the dark of the moon."

"Have you see them, Jethro?" Hatfield asked.

"Yes," Wills replied, "I've seen 'em—twice, ridin' up the track over by the lake. They ain't never turned off toward my cabin. Maybe they don't even know it's here. Hope not, for I sure don't hanker for no visits from them. Yes, I've seen 'em twice. The last time just last week. Nigh onto a dozen of 'em sloggin' along in the moonlight and drivin' a passel of loaded mules. They sidled along up into the Thicket and out of sight. Don't know where they went and didn't hanker to find out. Good riddance when they were out of sight, I say."

Hatfield's face remained impassive, but his eyes glowed at this bit of information.

"Looks like I played a straight hunch," he told himself exultantly. "That bunch that raided the ship do hole up here, and if they aren't part of the Cartinas outfit, I'm sure a heap mistook."

However, he decided against questioning his host further on the subject, at the moment.

"Sure 'pears we're in for a bad night," Jethro Willis observed. "Just listen to the wind howl. That wind goin' to bring rain, plenty of it. Well, reckon I'll go to the spring and get a bucket of water before I wash the dishes."

"I'll get it," Hatfield offered, rising to his feet, "I'll have it back by the time you get the table cleared. Then we'll wash the dishes."

He picked up the bucket and left the cabin. Old Jethro busied himself at the table, humming a camp meetin' song.

It was already a wild night. The tree branches tossed and groaned. The air was filled with flying leaves and twigs. Overhead the dark scud raced across the arch of the heavens, with the white stars glittering through the rifts. From the lake came the sound of waves breaking on the rocks.

WHEN he reached the spring, Hatfield placed the bucket on a convenient rock, leaned against a tree and rolled a cigarette. He could always think best in the open and he wanted to digest the information he had received. For some minutes he smoked, watching the grotesque play of the shadows as the palmettos tossed and writhed. Finally he pinched out the butt, filled the bucket and started back to the cabin. He had covered perhaps two thirds of the distance when he heard a sound above the grumbling of the wind. The slow beat of horses' irons on the hard surface of the path leading from the lake shore. He halted, peering and listening.

The beat of hoofs grew louder, then abruptly ceased. There was a jingling of bit irons, a popping of saddle leather. Hatfield glided forward cautiously. He paused, set the bucket aside and covered a few more cautious steps. He halted as he heard the creak of the cabin door opening. A golden bar of radiance streamed across the darkness, was cut by shadows, narrowed as the door was almost closed.

Hatfield moved again, until he was at

the corner of the cabin. The glow from the door crack showed two saddled and bridled horses standing with patiently hanging heads. Hatfield slipped around the corner and flattened himself against the wall, close by the door.

"We're takin' over here tonight, you old black hellion," he heard a rough voice say. "Now get busy and rustle us some grub. No back talk, if you don't want a gunbarrel bent over your head. Move!"

"Yessuh," Hatfield heard old Jethro mumble angrily. "Yessuh, right away." Hatfield knew they must be armed because Jethro was no coward.

Hatfield took another step forward. He stared hard at the bar of radiance for a moment so that his eyes would accustom themselves to the light. Then he shoved the door open and stepped inside the cabin.

Old Jethro Wills was cowering against the stove. Facing him were two men. One was dressed in cowhand garb. The other wore a cap, a pea jacket and rough woollen trousers.

The two men turned quickly at the sound of the opening door. The cowhand's eyes widened. His jaw dropped.

"Blazes! he yelled. "It's *him!*" His hand flashed to his holster.

Jethro Wills threw himself flat on the floor as red flashes blazed across the cabin. The cowhand reeled back with a choking cry. His companion had jerked a big revolver from his belt and was firing as fast as he could pull trigger.

Hatfield's left sleeve twitched and shredded. A lock of dark hair leaped from the side of his head. He reeled slightly from the shock of the grazing slug. Then his long Colt boomed sullenly. He stepped back, lowering his guns. The man in the pea jacket was sprawled beside his dead companion.

Old Jethro came slowly from the floor. His face was gray, his eyes wide and staring as they focused on the two figures on the floor.

"Boss," he quavered in a thin, reedy voice, "Boss, you done killed two of the Ghost Riders!"

CHAPTER VI

The Devil's Corral

GHOST RIDERS! Jethro's words were as an echo of Nate Persinger's remark a few nights before in the waterfront saloon in Galveston. But Hatfield only nodded.

"Could be," he agreed composedly as he replaced the spent shells in his guns with fresh cartridges. "Not a bad chore, I'd say."

"That's right," said Jethro, "but, boss, suppose some more of 'em come around looking for these two?"

"Well," Hatfield replied, "we'll try and fix it so they don't find them. Fact is, I doubt if any of the others know this pair was here. I guess these two outlaws either had spotted your cabin before or saw the light shining through the trees and decided it would be a good place to spend a bad night. Which would assume," he continued thoughtfully, "that wherever they were headed for is some distance off."

He was gazing at the man in rangeland garb as he spoke. He had instantly recognized him as the third man of the trio with whom he had the ruckus in Persinger's saloon. The seaman he had not seen before. For his general get-up and his tarred hands proved to Hatfield's satisfaction that he was a seaman. He was not one of the number who had been in the saloon the night of the shooting.

Hatfield turned to Jethro Wills. "Got a lantern?" he asked. "I want to find out for sure which direction these men were riding when they turned off into the path."

The lantern was quickly forthcoming. Hatfield lighted it and hooked the bail over his arm.

"Leave those fellers right where they are till I get back," he told Wills. "I want to look 'em over carefully. "First, though, I'll hustle down to the trail before the

rain blots out their tracks. It's starting already and I've a notion it'll be coming down hard before long."

Through an increasing drizzle, Hatfield hurried down the path. The ground was soft where the path joined the trail along the lake shore, and the tracks left by the two horses were plainly discernible. Hatfield examined them carefully, and shook his head.

"Came up from the south," he muttered. "That man who hightailed out of the saloon that night outfoxed me. I guessed wrong. He didn't turn north as I figured he would. He kept going east. The question is, where to? Looks pretty certain that he had a date to meet that ship when she turned in somewhere after leaving Galveston. Doubtless to pick up that sailor he had with him tonight.

"Now just where would she be likely to put in? Either Sabine Pass or Sabine, I'd say. Sabine is a little fishing village on a bluff overlooking the waters of Sabine Pass. Sort of out of the way, though it's only a couple of miles from Sabine Pass, which is about the same size a settlement but better known. Used to be quite a place when the pirates sashayed around on the Gulf.

"Chances are the steamer wouldn't try to cross the bar, but her small boats could make the passage without any trouble. If she did put in there, it wasn't just for the fun of the thing. I figure she had a definite mission in Galveston, but the disturbance there sort of tangled her twine and she pulled out in a hurry. This will require considerable thinking over."

He returned to the cabin. The rain was falling heavily now and the wind increasing in violence. His first chore was to get the two horses under cover in Jethro Wills' lean-to stable. He noted with interest that their brands were XT. He knew that XT was the burn of a big ranch north of Laredo on the Rio Grande, a port of entry from Mexico, and three hundred miles west of Galveston. The fact might be significant, or it might mean nothing at all. A saddle horse may be encountered a long ways from where it was branded and may have passed through many hands after the brand was stamped on its hide.

WHAT interested Hatfield even more were two brand-new rifles snugged in the saddle boots. They were identical with those he discovered in the cabin of the stranded British freighter.

"That ties it up perfect," he told himself exultantly. "Those two were a part of the bunch that drygulched Weston and myself. And it also ties up that bunch with the tramp which raced out of Galveston harbor. She's in the thick of this mess, somehow, and I'm beginning to think that big square-headed gent stands high in the outfit. Looked like a deep water man but, in certain other ways, he didn't look like one. I've a notion he's as much at home in a saddle as on the bridge."

By the time Hatfield finished caring for the horses, the rain was coming down in sheets and the wind was shaking the cabin with its blasts. He ducked around the corner of the building in a hurry and was glad to gain the warm shelter of the inside.

Old Jethro Wills had recovered from the shock of his nerve-wracking experience and was sitting by the stove, calmly smoking his pipe when Hatfield entered.

"Got some coffee hot for you," he announced. "Got a feelin' you need it."

Hatfield gratefully accepted the coffee and sat down. Wills gazed at him expectantly.

"Find out anything?" he asked.

"Yes," Hatfield replied. "I found out those two sidewinders came up from the south. Evidently they were headed into the Thicket and decided to stop off here for the night to avoid the storm. Come daylight, I'll try and find out where that trail they were riding leads to."

"You'll be takin' a bad chance," Wills said. "There's all sorts of game tracks and things runnin' this way and that in there. You're plumb liable to get yourself lost. And gettin' lost in the Thicket ain't no joke. Man's apt to die there."

"Maybe," Hatfield agreed, "but I'll risk it."

"No you won't," Wills disagreed. "'Cause I'm goin' along with you. Man and boy I've lived in the Thicket for fifty years. I know all its little tricks. I'll get you out."

Hatfield smiled at the old colored man.

"You'll be taking a chance," he warned. "No telling what's at the end of that trail."

Wills repeated the Ranger's remark: "Maybe, but I'll risk it." There was that in his voice that forbade argument.

"Okay," Hatfield agreed. He was really glad to accept Wills' offer. He did not discount the threat the Big Thicket held for anyone so rash as to dare its sinister tangle without a guide.

"Now," he said, setting down his coffee cup and rising to his feet, "I'll just take a look at those two punctured gents."

To the man in rangeland garb he gave scant attention. He quickly catalogued him as typical Border country bush popping scum, salty enough but with little under his hat besides hair.

The seaman was different. He had a vicious but intelligent face. His nose was high-bridged and prominent. The mouth hard set in death and the glazed eyes were large and set far apart.

"He was handling the chore, whatever it was," Hatfield decided. "The other feller was just a wrangler for the outfit, I'd say."

The revolver with which the man had been armed interested Hatfield. It was of English make and chambered for five cartridges.

"And that stranded ship packed the English flag," Hatfield recalled. "Wonder if there's a tie-up there. Begins to look like it. I've a hunch that the cargo of guns and ammunition she carried were consigned to this bunch in the first place. Wonder if the plan was to transship it to the speedy tramp? If so, where would she be headed for? Somewhere over to the west, probably. Yes, Brownsville, most likely. She could make the twenty miles up the River at this time of the year without trouble. It's a salty section over there, where anything is liable to happen and

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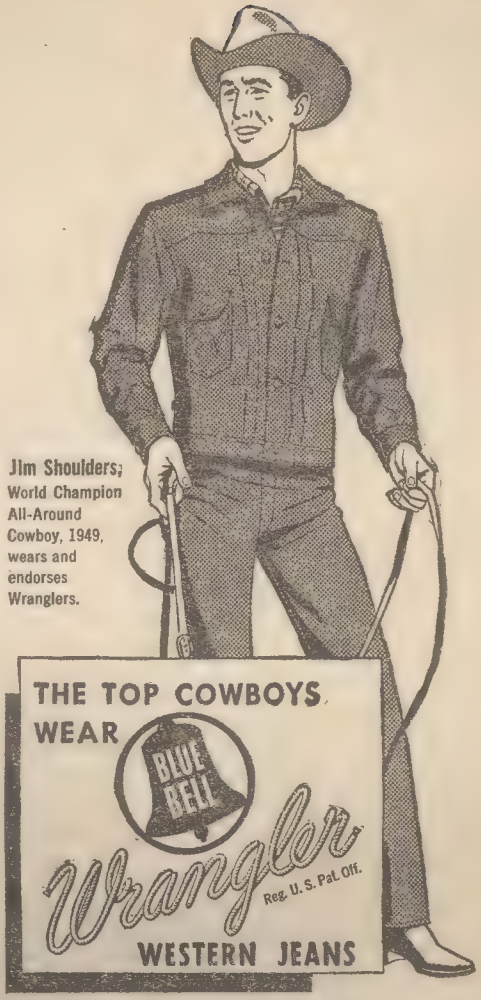
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usually does. And I've a prime notion that square-head gent is running in the arms Cartinas needs for his hell raising along the Border. This thing is beginning to look big, plenty big, and packed with potentialities for real trouble."

HATFIELD knew that, many years before, a Texas-Mexican by the name of Juan Cortinas had created plenty of turmoil in the Brownsville section of the Rio Grande country. He once actually captured Brownsville and for forty-eight hours completely controlled the Texas city of two or three thousand people, a thing unheard of before in the United States.

Cortinas had been a patriot of sorts and had posed as a liberator and had gathered a dangerously large following who fanatically believed him to be the champion of the humble people. He had defied capture and had ended his days as governor of the Mexican state of Tamaulipas, to which he fled after the Rangers broke his power and routed him from Texas.

That there had been a certain amount of right on Cortinas' side, Hatfield was forced to admit. The Texas-Mexicans of the section had been viciously exploited by unscrupulous promoters and politicians and had in many instances been defrauded of the land that was rightfully theirs.

Not that Hatfield suffered any illusions that the present day bandit leader was prompted by altruistic motives. He was out to feather his own nest and perfectly willing to use the humble and unlettered folk of the section as pawns, and sacrifices, to his predatory ambitions.

Nor was it by chance, Hatfield shrewdly concluded, that he had taken a name so closely resembling that of the semi-patriot of earlier years. There was still a magic in the name Cortinas. It had become legend to the dwellers of the Border country. And the small difference of an "a" instead of an "o" meant nothing to them. Being not unfamiliar with the Latin temperament, Hatfield knew that the difference might mean considerable to the descendants of Cortinas who still lived south of the Line. They might well resent somebody purloining the exact name of their "illustrious" ancestor. The realization of this face attested to the shrewdness of today's Juan Cartinas. Such a man might easily set a thousand miles of Border country aflame.

"And his chief need would be guns with which to arm his followers," Hatfield muttered as he began turning out the dead man's pockets.

Aside from further proof that the man in the pea jacket was a seaman—a box of Copenhagen snuff, among other things—the pockets disclosed nothing of significance, although they did disgorge a considerable sum of money.

"This will pay for that busted chair and the broken dishes," Hatfield said, passing the coins to Jethro Wills. "Now we'll cover these gents with a blanket and first thing in the morning we'll plant 'em back in the brush. We'll hide the saddles and bridles and turn the horses loose on the range. Don't want anything lying around that might connect this place with what happened, in case somebody might come snooping around. In which case you'd be liable to suffer. The rain will wash out the hoof prints they left and there'll be nothing to show these two horned toads were here. And nobody will know about the fight tonight till I report it to the sheriff of the county, which won't be for a while yet."

During the night the storm blew itself out. The morning dawned bright and clear and windless. Hatfield and Wills were stirring with the first light. They packed the bodies of the two owlhoots well back into the growth and buried them, careful to remove or conceal all traces of the excavation. The saddles and bridles were hidden deep in the brush. Then Hatfield led the two horses out onto the prairie and turned them loose, knowing that the range bred animals would fend for themselves.

"And now we're all set to travel," Hatfield said when he returned to the cabin.

"Yes, suh, all set," Wills replied. "I

done packed a poke with the cawn pone and other vittles."

"And I've got coffee and some other stuff in my saddle pouch," Hatfield added. "Lock up the shack and let's go."

BY THE time they had covered but a few miles of slow going, Hatfield realized to the full the threat of the Big Thicket. The veritable jungle of growth was criss-crossed by a maze of tracks made by animals in their devious wanderings in search of food. The trail they followed was but one of an infinite number, with nothing to differentiate it from the other faint paths traversing the growth. The torrential rain of the night before had washed away all hoof marks. Where the ground was neither flinty or overgrown, there was nothing that would serve as a guide.

But it was the trained eyes of the Ranger, accustomed to seeking out all but invisible trails, and not old Jethro's woods wisdom that was their salvation.

"I'm scared I can't do nothin,' boss," Wills said at length. "The ground's all washed bare and all these tracks look the same. Them scalleywags might just as well have gone one way as another."

Hatfield had been paying the ground scant attention. "We're on the right track," he replied quietly.

"How you know, suh?" Wills asked.

In answer, Hatfield pointed to the encroaching growth on their right, which brushed the sides of the animals traveling single file. Wills followed the direction of the gesture with his eyes and perceived a broken and dangling twig.

"And right ahead," Hatfield added. "See where some of the leaves have been stripped off that palmetto frond? Well, it's been like that all the way up here. Those mules were carrying aparejos, which are rawhide pack sacks. The sacks were stuffed full and protruded way beyond the sides of the mules and brushed against the growth all the time. Every now and then they'd break a twig or strip off a few leaves. That's what I've been watching."

Wills shook his head in admiration. "Never thought of that," he confessed. "I was watchin' the ground all the time, and seein' nothin'."

"You didn't know how those mules were loaded, and I did," Hatfield deprecated his own acuteness for details.

"Should have knowed," Wills grunted. "They was loaded that night I saw 'em goin' in here."

"Well," Hatfield said, "anyhow they gave us something to go by. Which wouldn't have been the case if there had only been horses. As it is, we shouldn't have over much trouble running down those hellions."

But nevertheless, progress was tediously slow. Time after time they lost the trail amid the web of conflicting tracks. And only by the most painstaking diligence were they able to regain it. All the long day they forged ahead, mostly at a slow walk. About mid afternoon they paused to boil some coffee and eat of the cold meat and corn pone they had brought with them. Then, after a smoke, they continued their quest. They were heartened at times by discovering hoof prints where the tangle of branches overhead was so thick that the rain had failed to penetrate the leafy screen.

The sun dropped down the long western slant of the heavens and shadows began curdling amid the thick growth.

"Looks like we'll have to spend the night out," Hatfield observed. "We'll keep an eye open for a likely spot to make camp and call it a day."

A little later, as they were threading their way through a dense thicket, Samantha, the mule, raised her head and emitted a raucous bray.

"She always does that when it begins to get late and she's tired and hungry," Wills remarked.

"We'll make camp as soon as we find a spring or a creek to give us water," Hatfield decided.

Followed another quarter of a mile of slow trudging with the growth brushing them on either side.

"Getting a bit lighter ahead," Hatfield

observed. "I've a notion we're coming to a creek or something. We'll see in a minute."

But both were utterly unprepared for what they did see a few minutes later. They pushed through a final fringe of brush and found themselves on the edge of an almost circular clearing perhaps a hundred yards in diameter. The ground was bare and scored by innumerable hoof prints. Over to one side was a huddle of shacks dominated by a long and low structure very strongly built of logs and roofed with split poles. All the buildings except one were new.

"What in blazes is the meaning of this?" Hatfield wondered aloud.

"You won't relish findin' out, cowboy. Elevate!" a harsh voice echoed his words from the growth to the right. An ominous double click emphasized the command.

CHAPTER VII

Hogtied

HATFIELD "elevated". There was nothing else to do. He was "caught settin'." Seething with anger at his own carelessness, he sat rigid in his saddle, hands raised shoulder high.

There was a rustle in the growth and a man stepped into view, cocked rifle at the ready. He was a squat, blocky, alert looking man with hard features and keen looking eyes.

"What you two jiggers lookin' for?" he demanded menacingly.

Hatfield's steady gaze rested on his face. "And what's the notion, throwing down on a couple of peaceful hombres taking a short cut through the brush?" he asked.

The other's brows drew together in a frown. He studied the Ranger for a moment.

"Fellers who butt into things what ain't none of their business is liable to regret it," he replied. He raised his voice.

"All right, Curt," he called, "come and get this feller's hardware. Look him over careful, and the other one, too."

The growth on the left rustled and a second man stepped into view, also armed with a cocked rifle. Unlike his companion, he was lean and lanky, with a stupidly vicious face. He uncocked the rifle, set it carefully aside and approached Hatfield.

"Unfork," he rumbled in a voice like to the growl of a beast of prey.

"And don't try nothin' funny," warned the first man. "Come down with your hands where they are. I got a itchy trigger finger."

Hatfield obeyed, dismounting lithely with his hand still in the air. Old Jethro Wills followed suit in obedience to a preemptory gesture from the leveled rifle. The lean man stepped forward, plucked Hatfield's guns from their holsters, ran expert hands over his body, feeling carefully under his arms and at the back of his neck. Wills received similar attention.

"All right," said the man with the rifle. "Walk straight ahead, with your hands up, slow."

The man Curt voiced a question. "Where we goin' to put 'em—in the big shack with the others?" he asked.

His companion shook his head. "Nope, not yet," he said. "Don't want 'em talkin' with them fellers in there till we know more about 'em. We'll lock 'em in the back room of the cabin till the Boss gets here and looks 'em over. Reckon we can use 'em, all right. They look husky, and there's more work to be did hereabouts. Turn to the right, you two, and then straight ahead."

A few moments later Hatfield and Wills paused in front of the door of a cabin somewhat larger and better built than the others. The lanky man circled around them, careful to keep out of line with his companion's rifle, and opened the door.

"Inside, and straight across the room to the door," the rifleman growled. Curt, you go back and get the mule and that yaller horse and put 'em with the other critters."

The cabin, Hatfield noted, was much older than those surrounding it, which had undoubtedly been erected but recently. Walking through the door, he found himself in a room roughly but comfortably furnished with a table, chairs and bunks built against the walls, all evidently homemade. In one corner stood a stove, rusty but in good repair. A huge kettle simmered on the stove, giving off a rich and promising smell. Against one wall, their barrels gleaming like the parallel pipes of an organ, rested a number of rifles.

All this the Lone Wolf noted in a single swift glance as he crossed the room to an open door which led to a second and smaller room. He and Wills were shoved through the door, which banged shut behind them. There was the snick of a shot bolt.

Hatfield glanced about. The room was devoid of furniture save for two bunks built against the walls. There was a single narrow window, strongly barred with iron.

WORDLESS, the Ranger sat down on one of the bunks, fished out the makings, and rolled a cigarette. Wills sat down beside him and began filling his pipe.

"Looks like we done put our foot in it, boss," he remarked in low tones.

"Uh-huh, both feet, I'd say," Hatfield replied. "And all our own fault. When your mule brayed we should have been on the lookout from then on. Those two sidewinders heard it and knew somebody was headed this way. They holed up and waited, and we ambled right into the trap."

"Well, reckon nobody can think of everything," Wills replied, puffing at his pipe. "What sort of a place is this, anyhow?"

"Got me guessing," Hatfield admitted. "Judging from what that feller said, there's somebody else locked up in that big shack over there. Why, Pete only knows."

At this moment the man Curt returned to the cabin, growling curses.

"I got the mule, all right, and put it up," Hatfield heard him say. "But when I tried to take hold of that yaller devil's bridle, he nigh to chawed my arm off and scooted into the brush."

"To hell with him, we'll round him up later," replied the other. "Get busy with the chuck."

"Nobody can put a hand on Goldy," Hatfield chuckled to Wills. "He'll be hanging around waiting for me. Only he's liable to have a long wait, from the looks of things," he added grimly.

He rose to his feet as he spoke and crossed to the narrow window. By craning his neck, he could get a sideways view of the long building. The closed door was within his range of vision. He noted that the windows were barred.

"It's a calaboose, all right," he told Wills as he resumed his seat.

"And I bet the folks what have been droppin' out of sight hereabouts for the past three or four months are locked up there," Wills said. "Used to be four colored fellers lived over on the east bank of the lake. One mornin' they just wasn't there no more, and nobody's seen hide or hair of 'em since. Same thing for a couple of white trappers who lived on Cripple Crik over to the west. They just all of a sudden come up missin'. Folks said the ha'ants got 'em. I figgered they'd just got tired of the Thicket and moved off, like fellers do every now and then. Ain't so sure now."

Hatfield nodded. The light was failing and he hastened to give their prison a thorough examination. The results were not encouraging. The walls were of closely joined logs. The floor was of thick planks, as was the partition separating the two rooms. The door was of similar planks and held in place by heavy, wrought-iron strap hinges. The door had been roughly fitted to the jamb, so that there was a crack into which Hatfield could insert his finger. This aperture afforded him a restricted view of the outer room. Placing one eye against it he could see his guns lying on the table, together with the articles taken from his pockets. Apparently they were being reserved for the Boss, whoever he might be.

Hatfield could also see one of the men busy over the stove, apparently dishing up the contents of the big kettle. While he watched, a voice called from the outer room:

"All right, you fellers, stand back away from the door. And don't forget, I got you covered."

Hatfield glided silently to the bunk and sat down. The door opened a crack and two plates of steaming stew and a hunk of bread were shoved through. Two tin cups of coffee followed.

"Don't aim to starve you," said the voice, adding with an evil chuckle. "Want to keep you good and strong."

THE door banged shut. Hatfield retrieved the food and placed it on the bunk. Before eating, however, he continued his examination of the room. The window he quickly decided was hopeless. It was narrow and the iron bars were firmly imbedded in the wood. The door appeared little better. Only a battering ram, he decided, could smash it. And even were one available, the presence of the two armed men in the outer room discarded such an expedient. He returned to the crack between door and jamb and peered through. The man at the stove was still dishing up stew, sloshing it into a large flat pan. Hatfield watched him, his fingers idly tracing the course of the heavy strap hinge that held the door in place.

Abruptly he forgot all about the man by the stove. He stared at the timber that formed the door jamb. Its surface was rotten and worm-eaten, so much so that the outer wood crumbled under the raking of his nails. Hatfield's eyes suddenly glowed with excitement.

Not that he harbored the illusion that he could smash the timber, which doubtless was firm enough beneath the surface. But there was a chance that the rusty screws holding the hinge in place might not be firmly seated in the wood. Elated by the discovery, he returned to the bunk and rejoined Wills, who was already eating with appetite.

"Good chuck, anyhow," said the colored man, "and that's somethin'."

"You're right there," Hatfield agreed, tackling his own plate. "And," he added in almost inaudible tones, "if I can just find something to use as a screwdriver, we may be able to bust out of here, that is, if those two sidewinders go off and leave us alone for a while, or go to sleep."

"They took my knife," Wills whispered back.

"Mine, too," Hatfield replied, "and everything else except my tobacco and matches. Maybe there's an iron strap or something holding these bunks together. We'll look soon as we finish eating."

Wills suddenly cocked his head in an attitude of listening.

"I believe those fellers are leavin'," he said. "I'm plumb sure I heard the door open."

Hatfield moved to the window and peered out. Another moment and he sighted their captors, heading for the long building with the barred windows. One bore the big pan of stew. The other packed a basket heaped with hunks of bread. Arriving at the door of the building, they squatted in front of it.

Peering closely, Hatfield saw that the door did not quite reach to the sill. Beneath it was a narrow opening. Through this the pan of stew was shoved. The bread followed. Then the two men arose and turned back toward the cabin.

"They were just feeding the fellers they've got locked up in that big shack," Hatfield told Wills as he resumed his seat on the bunk. "Judging from the amount of chuck they packed over, there must be quite a few folks in that shack."

Wills shook his woolly head. "I ain't feelin' so good," he declared as he cleaned his plate with a gobbet of bread. "I'm done scairt we got ourselves in big trouble."

"Maybe," Hatfield admitted. "Let's take a look at these bunks."

They removed the tumbled blankets and gave the bunks a careful examination, with barren results. They were of planks nailed together. Nothing was discovered that might serve as a tool with which to

loosen the screws.

"How about your belt buckle?" suggested Wills. "Mine ain't strong enough."

Hatfield shook his head as he fingered the buckle. "Too thick," he said, "and there's nothing to file it down with."

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and began fumbling with a cunningly concealed secret pocket in the broad leather belt. He drew forth something that glittered in the fading light.

Jethro Wills stared at the gleaming object, a silver star set on a silver circle. The badge of the Texas Rangers.

"So that's what you are, boss!" he breathed. "Man! Man! I'se feelin' better already."

"Don't be in too much of a hurry," Hatfield cautioned. "First let's see if this thing will do any good."

He crossed to the door and was elated to find that the curved edge of the badge fitted into the slots furrowing the heads of the screws. He exerted a tentative pressure. The screw moved slightly. Giving over the attempt for the moment, he placed his eye to the crack between door and jamb and peered into the lighted room beyond.

The two guards had drawn up chairs to the table and were eating their evening meal. Hatfield watched them a moment, then returned to the bunk.

"We'll have to wait till they either leave or turn in for the night," he told Wills. "Can't take a chance on them hearing us at work. Be risky enough when they're asleep. Those screws are liable to make a racket coming out. Might as well stretch out and take it easy for a while. Nothing gained by sitting here chewing our nails. Believe I can stand another smoke."

CHAPTER VIII

The Sprung Trap

OUTSIDE the darkness deepened. Stars peeped through the narrow window. Whippoorwills began calling in the brush. An owl plainted querulously. On some lonely lake or pond nearby, a loon voiced its maniacal laugh. A night hawk answered with a raucous screech. Leaves rustled to the whisper of the wind. The busy night life of the Big Thicket was under way.

From the outer room came the grumble of voices and a clattering of pots and pans as the two guards cleaned up after their meal. For some time the sounds persisted, then lessened and died away. The silence was unbroken save for an occasional remark. Gradually these grew less frequent. There was the creaking of a bunk as someone laid down on it. A little later, a similar sound came from the opposite side of the room.

Still, Hatfield lay motionless on his bunk. Not until a rhythmical sound of snoring quivered the air did he arise and noiselessly approach the door. Peering through the crack, he could just make out a form on the bunk built against the far wall. The other guard he could not see. He noted that his guns still lay on the table. He carefuly marked their position lest the dimly burning lamp should flicker out. Drawing a deep breath, he went to work on the door.

As he anticipated, the screws had become somewhat loosened with the passage of time. But they were still firmly enough fixed in the wood to make their removal with his makeshift tool a tedious and difficult procedure. He was wet with sweat and his fingers were sore and bleeding by the time the first hinge swung free. He sat down on the bunk and rested for a while before tackling the lower hinge with renewed vigor.

Here the task was even more difficult. He had to squat on his heels and work from an awkward angle. Besides, the edge of the badge was by now bent and battered. There were four screws to be removed and each one seemed more firmly fixed than the preceding one. After what seemed on eternity of back-breaking effort, the last screw came out of the wood and the hinge swung free. The door sagged slightly, creaking against the

bolt, but Hatfield thrust his fingers between door and jamb and held it in place.

For long minutes he stood breathing deeply, until his strength had returned and his nerves were steady once more. Then he turned and touched Jethro Wills, who had crouched beside him during the entire ordeal.

"Slide your fingers in the crack and get a good hold on the door," he breathed to the colored man. "When I give the word, jerk the door free from the bolt and throw it back into the room. I've got to get my guns off the table and in action before those hellions catch onto what's happening. One slip and we're goners."

Hatfield knew that success or failure of the perilous attempt hinged on one small item. Were the guns on the table still loaded, he had a chance. If the cartridges had been removed, he was already good as dead. Face grimly set, he stepped across to the far side of the door and stood poised.

"All right," he told Wills. "Let her go!"

The brawny colored man jerked with all his strength. The door hurtled back and hit the floor with a crash that shook the building. Hatfield bounded through the opening and seized his guns. One fleeting glance told him they were fully loaded.

The thick-set man was already half way out his bunk, gun in hand. Hatfield shot him before he could pull trigger. He sank back with a strangled cry as the Ranger whirled to face the blazing gun of the second guard. He heard the screech of passing lead, felt its hot breath fan his cheek. Weaving, ducking, he fired again and again.

JETHRO WILLS' yells cut through the uproar: "Hold up, Boss, hold up! You done got him! He's shot to pieces! Man, oh, man! What a bobberty it was while it lasted!"

Hatfield lowered his smoking Colts. The second guard was huddled back in his bunk, motionless. The splash of blood dripping to the floor sounded loud in the sudden silence.

"This 'un's done for, too," Jethro Wills shouted across the room. "You got him spang in the ribs."

Hatfield ejected the spent shells from his guns and replaced them with fresh cartridges. He holstered the irons and glanced around the room. He strode to where the rifles rested against the wall, examined them swiftly and found them in perfect working condition.

In a corner was a stuffed pack sack. Hatfield jerked it open, thrust in a hand and drew forth a fistful of shining brass cartridges.

"Ammunition for those rifles," he said. For a moment he stood silent, the concentration furrow deep between his black brows. He turned to Wills.

"First off we'll find out about those fellers locked up in the big shack," he said. "If they prove to be the right sort, we'll turn 'em lose and arm 'em with these rifles. No telling how soon the rest of the bunch may come back here. When they do, we've either got to be ready for them or in the clear."

He strode across the room and began going through the pockets of the heavy-set man. With an exclamation of satisfaction, he drew forth a bunch of keys.

"One of these should unlock the door of that shack," he told Wills. "Bring the lamp and come along."

Wills plucked the lamp from the bracket in which it rested, turned up the wick and shielded the chimney with his hand. He followed Hatfield out the door and to the big shanty with the barred windows. As they approached they could hear a hum of excited voices inside the building. Evidently the occupants had been aroused by the shooting.

Hatfield paused at one of the windows. "Come over here, you fellers, and show yourselves," he called. "Hold the lamp close, Jethro."

There was a shuffling of feet and a shining black face appeared at the window. Jethro Wills peered through the bars, holding the lamp close.

"Tom Hartsook!" he exclaimed. "Ain't

that you, Tom?"

"Sure, it's me," the prisoner replied excitedly. "Glory be! It's Jethro Wills! Hiyuh, Jeth! Sure it's me, and Abe and Lafe and little Mose is in here, too. And Bob Mason and Sam Withrow from over on Cripple Creek, and some more fellers. Let us out of here, Jeth! Let us out!"

"Bring the lamp," Hatfield said. He strode around the corner of the building to the door, found a key that fitted the heavy padlock. Another moment and he flung the door wide.

Through the opening crowded eleven men, seven colored and four white. They were unkempt and unshaven. Their clothes hung in tatters. Their faces were haggard, their eyes wild. They crowded around Hatfield, jabbering excitedly.

Hatfield stilled the turmoil. "Come on," he ordered, and led the way back to the cabin. With the motley crew inside, he closed the door.

"Tell me about it later," he said tersely. "First off, grab those rifles and load them. Fill your pockets with cartridges."

He up-ended the pack sack as he spoke and poured its contents onto the floor.

THE released prisoners, who evidently were familiar with guns, seized the weapons and quickly filled the magazines. The touch of the cold steel seemed to fill them with confidence and courage. The black man, Tom Hartsook, a burly giant, grinned at Hatfield with a flash of milk-white teeth.

"Now we's ready, boss-man," he said. "You tell us what to do and we'll do it."

"I've got a notion the first thing will be some steaming coffee," Hatfield said. "Get the fire going good and heat it up. And if you're hungry, grab off whatever chuck you can find. Come here, Hartsook—that's your name, I believe. You can tell what this is all about. Why were you fellers locked up in that shack, and who put you there?"

"Those devils of Ghost Riders caught us and brought us here, all of us," Hartsook replied. "Only they ain't no ghosts.

[*Turn page*]

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They's plumb flesh and blood devils, and worse than any ha'ant what ever let out a screech."

"Why did they bring you here?" Hatfield asked.

"Brought us here to clear the land of brush and build cabins," the black man replied. "They lived in the cabins, them and the other fellers they guided here."

"The other fellers?"

"Yes. Mexican lookin' fellers, most of 'em. They brought them here to drill 'em. Drilled 'em on horses on the cleared ground. Regular cavalry drilling. After a while, one bunch would leave and then another bunch would come along to get drilled."

Hatfield's lips pursed in a soundless whistle. He nodded to Hartsook to go on.

"Every now and then," continued the colored man, "a big short man would show up and tell everybody else what to do. He wasn't tall like me, but he was bigger and broader. Almost as broad across the shoulders as you are, boss-man."

"Have blue eyes and a sort of square head?" Hatfield asked.

"That's right," said Hartsook. "That's him. I figure he's the head devil of the lot."

"I've a notion you're right," Hatfield agreed soberly. "What else?"

"They'd bring in horses, and mules loaded with stuff," said Hartsook. "Last week they brought in a whole passel of mules loaded down with guns like these here ones. They stuck 'em in one of the cabins. Today they took 'em all away."

"What time today?" Hatfield asked.

"Left just about an hour before them two dead ones brought you and Jethro in," Hartsook replied. "We saw 'em bring you in, through the window. Early today there was nine or ten of 'em hangin' around, keepin' guard over us fellers while we cut brush. They appeared to be expecting somebody to come along, and they did a heap of cussin' because whoever it was didn't show up. Then long toward evening a feller come riding in along the trail that leads over east through the Thicket. There was quite a bobberty. They hauled the mules out of the stable up to the north end of the clearing—can't see it from down here. They loaded them mules up with the guns and away they all went, likkerty-split, excepting the two they left here to keep an eye on us fellers. They locked us up before they left."

"You don't know where they headed for with the guns?"

Hartsook shook his head. "That trail runs down to the southeast corner of the Thicket," he said. "Don't know where they'd go from there."

"You say there's a stable up to the north end of the clearing?" Hatfield said. "Any horses up there?"

"Reckon there is," Hartsook replied. "There's always some extra ones there."

HATFIELD nodded thoughtfully. He accepted a cup of coffee from little Mose Hartsook, a bow-legged, gnome-like colored man with bright and twinkling eyes. While he drank the coffee, he studied the released prisoners.

The four white men were lithe and bronzed, evidently trappers and hunters, with the quick, furtive movements of the animals among which they lived. The colored men were a hardy, good-natured appearing lot. Hatfield arrived at a decision.

"I'd say there's little chance of that bunch showing back here anyways soon," he said. "So we can take our time about things. And I'm playing a hunch I know where they're heading for with those guns. Also got a notion you fellers wouldn't mind a chance to even up a few scores. Right?"

A unanimous growl greeted the suggestion. Bob Mason, one of the white trappers, abruptly stripped off his ragged shirt. His sinewy back was a mass of weals and livid scars.

"Their whips did that," he remarked significantly. "And you're askin' *me* if I'd like a chance to even the score!"

"Reckon we all got marks to show," big Tom Hartsook added grimly. "Just give us a chance, boss-man, just give us a chance!"

"Okay," Hatfield told them. "I'll give you the chance—a chance to even up with these hellions and at the same time do a good chore for your state and your fellow citizens. And you'll have plenty of authority to back you up in anything you do."

He held up his bent and battered Ranger badge as he spoke. The group stared in silence at the symbol of law and order and justice.

"I'll deputize all of you," Hatfield continued, stowing away the badge. "We'll clean up a bit and get ready to take the trail. The loaded mules will slow 'em up and I've a notion we can figure a way to hit them where it'll hurt the most. I suppose somebody knows the way out of this tangle, in the direction they took?"

"I know it," said Bob Mason, "and so does my partner, Sam Withrow. We'll get you out of the Thicket by the same way they took."

"All right," Hatfield said. "Hartsook, take two or three men with you and see if you can find enough horses to take care of everybody. Jethro's mule should be up there with the other critters. No, never mind about a horse for me. I'll have mine here in a jiffy."

He flung open the door as he spoke, and whistled. A moment later there was a crashing in the brush and Goldy came cantering across the clearing, snorting disgustedly. Hatfield immediately got the rig off him and began rubbing him down.

"If you find some oats up there, bring a bucketful along," he called to Hartsook.

"Okay," the colored man called back. "And over to the left is a spring, if he wants water."

The men in the cabin had broken out provisions stowed on shelves and were preparing a meal and more coffee. After they finished eating, they brought water from the spring and enjoyed a good wash.

"That helps some, anyhow," said Bob Mason as he smoothed his touseled hair. "I could sure use a shave, but that can wait. I feel fit for anything now. Man, but it's good to be free again!"

Outside sounded the click of hoofs. Big Tom Hartsook entered the room.

"Horses and saddles for everybody," he announced. "Good critters, too. I got 'em tied outside, all ready to throw the leather on 'em."

"Within two hours it will be light enough to start," Hatfield said. "Everybody got a gun in good working order?"

There was a general nodding of heads. "I aim to hang onto mine after the shindig is over," said Bob Mason. "This sure is a good piece of iron. Brand new, too."

Hatfield examined the bodies of the two guards. He discovered nothing of importance.

"None of these outlaws pack anything that might tie 'em up with somebody," he announced disgustedly. "The man who runs this outfit sure doesn't miss any bets. Anyhow, here's considerable dinero you fellers can divide. A mite of pay for all the work you did here. Before this thing is over, maybe you'll tie onto a bit more."

CHAPTER IX

The Slipped Noose

LATER, as they rode away from the clearing in the first light of dawn, Hatfield outlined his plan to his followers.

"The way I see it, those hellions are headed for Sabina, the fishing village two miles this side of Sabina Pass," he explained. "I figure that ship I told you about will be laying just outside the bar, waiting to receive the guns they're packing with them. Those guns are headed west somewhere, to Port Isabel or Brownsville, I'd say. Most likely Brownsville. They're to arm Juan Cartinas' army of liberation, as I reckon he calls the poor dupes he's been drilling and talking into believing they're due to take over the running of things and right the wrongs that have been done them.

"Given enough arms, he can start a regular roaring hell raising along the Border. It's been done before. Juan Flores

did it. Clate Olguin did it. And so did several others of the same sort. This Cartinas appears to have more brains than any of the lot, and that makes him all the more dangerous. If he isn't stopped, the final outcome will be killings and robberies all along the Border. The poor dupes who believe in him will be slaughtered and Cartinas will make off with the loot. If we can grab off that mule train of rifles, we'll put a considerable knot in his twine."

"I'd like to tie a knot in his blasted neck," growled lanky Bob Mason.

"Maybe you'll get the chance. I sure hope so," Hatfield replied. "As I figure it, they'll slide into Sabine after dark. They'd hardly tackle the chore in the daytime. Then small boats will put out from the ship lying outside the bar and take on the cargo. I've a notion those guns were due to be transhipped at Galveston, but the hurricane, and some other things, put a crimp in that little scheme. Chances are the mule train will hole up somewhere most of today and start out again along toward evening. We've got a sixty-mile ride ahead of us, but we should be able to catch them up. If we can just hit them in the act of loading the guns onto the boats, we ought to be able to drop a loop on the whole bunch, Cartinas included."

"Who is this here Cartinas, anyhow?" asked Tom Hartsook.

"Nobody seems to know for sure," Hatfield answered. "But I'm beginning to have a notion about him," he added grimly. "If my hunch works out, maybe we'll know for sure by this time tomorrow."

The trail through the thicket was faint and tortuous, but Mason and the others were thoroughly familiar with all the vagaries of the sprawling forest. Once or twice when they were doubtful as to which fork to take, it was the Lone Wolf's keen eyes and acute perception for the smallest detail that put them on the right track. An overturned pebble, a crushed leaf or a broken grass blade was enough.

Around about noon, they won out of the Thicket, and after that the task was easier. For the trail, faint though it was, flowed steadily south by slightly east.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Hatfield stifled a chuckle. Never in the history of the corps, he was sure, had a Texas Ranger led such a posse. Long-haired, bewhiskered, hatless, their tattered clothing fluttering in the breeze, no company of tramps crouched over meager fires in a railroad culvert could have looked more hopeless or bedraggled. But their eyes were bright with purpose and faces black and faces white were grimly set. And Hatfield knew that these keen-eyed forest dwellers were dead shots with the heavy rifles they carried. He had little fear of the result did they manage to come to grips with the outlaw band.

Shortly after leaving the Thicket, they paused to eat of the bread and meat they carried in their pouches. Then, after a smoke from the tobacco Hatfield and Jethro Wills shared, they were in the saddle again.

ALL the long afternoon they rode at a steady pace. Riders unaccustomed to long stretches in the hull grew chafed and sore, but no complaint was voiced. Grim and purposeful, they rode, woods-wise eyes noting everything of significance.

The sun sank in scarlet and gold. The heavens flamed a chromatic glory. Blue shadows touched the waving grass heads. A whisper of wind came up from the south, heavy with salt. Hatfield knew they could be no great distance from the Gulf. Suddenly, as they were passing a dense thicket, he called a halt and pointed ahead.

Something over a mile distant, the trail writhed up a long slope to a crest that stood out hard and clear against the darkening sky. And bobbing over the knife-edge of the crest were a number of black dots.

"It's them," the Ranger exclaimed. "We've caught up with 'em. Hold it here in the shadow till they're over the sag. Then hurry."

Quivering with excitement, the posse watched the last moving dot vanish from sight. Then they surged ahead, Goldy set-

ting the pace. Up the long swell of the sag they drummed at a fast pace. But before reaching the crest, Hatfield again called a halt. Alone, he rode on a little farther and dismounted. Bending low, he glided forward, keeping in the shadow of a straggle of growth that edged the trail on the east. Finally he reached a position from which he could peer down the opposite sag. The dusk was curdling in the hollows now. Far ahead, perhaps five miles to the south, he could make out a faint glimmer of lights that must mark the fishing village of Sabine, with the blue waters of the Gulf beyond.

Of the mule train he could see nothing, although once he thought he spotted a drifting shadow some distance beyond where the sag leveled off. He waited a few minutes more, then hurried back to his men.

"We'll take it easy for a spell," he said. "Don't want to run onto them unexpectedly. I've a notion they won't be in any hurry to reach the village. The fishing folks down there are pretty apt to go to bed early and that bunch will likely hold back till they are all housed up."

The posse nodded understanding. For nearly three miles they walked their horses, while the stars glowed golden in the black velvet of the sky and night birds called from the thickets.

Gradually the lights ahead winked out. But Hatfield spotted more distant gleams that glowed steadily and seemed to slightly alter their position with rhythmic regularity.

"The riding lights of a ship," he said. "She's out there, all right. My hunch was a straight one. Yes, she's standing by, just outside the bar. Speed it up a bit till we're close to the town."

Another half hour and they could see the loom of the clustered buildings of the fishing village. Ten minutes more and Hatfield called a halt at the edge of a stand of trees.

"We'll unfork here and tie the horses," he said. "Then we'll sneak ahead on foot. Careful, now, and don't make a noise. We want to be right on top of them before they know we're around. If they hear us coming and get set, we'll get a hot reception. It's a salty bunch. They won't be taken without a shooting. Make every cartridge count."

Low mutters and a clutching of weapons answered him as the men slid from their saddles. A few minutes later they were gliding forward with the noiseless steps of the forest bred, the tall form of the Lone Wolf in the lead, Big Tom Hartsook and Jethro Wills crowding close behind him.

THEY circled the silent houses of the village, still following the trail, which led to the edge of the bluff, down which it tumbled steeply. Peering over the lip, Hatfield could see lanterns bobbing about on the narrow strip of beach below. Their glow showed three boats rocking at the water's edge. Figures moved and to his ears came the sound of voices. The outlaws were unloading the mules.

"Let's go," Hatfield told his men. "Right on top of 'em!"

A TEXAS TALL TALE

TEXAS TALL TALES are part of American literature and the one we like best is the story of the cowboy who was always bragging about the jumping ability of his horse. One day he made a bet that his horse could jump across a very wide, deep canyon. He took a good run, spurred the horse on and they came to the edge and leaped out into space. Twenty feet out they sailed, forty, fifty, sixty—the first fine momentum began to slack off. Eighty feet and the cowboy felt the horse beginning to shudder under him. Then that smart cayuse saw he wasn't going to make it. Did he take any chances? No sir. He just turned around and went back.

At reckless speed he led the rush down the slope. They reached the beach before their presence was discovered. A startled yell sounded, and a confused babble.

"In the name of the State of Texas!" Hatfield thundered. "Throw up your hands! You are under arrest."

Another yell, a spurt of flame and the crash of a shot answered the command. Then a crackling roar as the posse opened fire.

Weaving, ducking, firing with both hands, Hatfield dashed toward the howling, shooting mob. Tom Hartsook's lion-roar sounded above the tumult, and Bob Mason's screeching rebel yell. Screams, shrieks, curses came from the demoralized outlaws as they fled madly from the storm blast of lead.

Hatfield had hoped to take some prisoners who might be induced to talk. But his followers, seething with the memories of weeks and months of abuse, had other notions. They continued to pull trigger so long as a single owlhoot remained on his feet. And it was useless to try to stop them.

As the thunder of the guns lessened, Hatfield's ears caught a sound of beating rowlocks. Running forward, he just made out a dark shape gliding out to sea. One of the three boats was missing.

"Hartsook, Wills!" he roared. "Into one of those boats! Grab the oars! Some of 'em are getting away."

The two colored men piled into the nearest boat and seized the oars. Hatfield leaped in beside them. The water was lashed to foam as they turned the clumsy craft and headed after the shadow dimming away in the darkness.

But very quickly Hatfield realized the pursuit was hopeless. His rowers, unaccustomed to the long and heavy oars, caught crabs, filled the air with spray, worked madly, but made little progress. Standing recklessly on a thwart, Hatfield emptied both his guns into the darkness ahead, with no results, so far as he could ascertain.

From the funnel of the steamer, still hundreds of yards distant, came a staccato roar. The riding lights swung around in a wide arc, then danced ahead and swiftly dwindled in the darkness.

"Hold up," Hatfield told the rowers. "They made it. She's putting out to sea. And," he added bitterly, "I'll bet a hatful of pesos the big he-wolf of the pack was in that boat. All right, back to shore and let's see what we bagged."

Bob Mason, his bearded lips split in a wide grin, met them as they stepped ashore.

"Got nine of the devils," he announced. "And all the pack sacks. Not one of 'em unloaded, though they had some of 'em open. The guns are all here."

"Anybody hurt?" Hatfield asked.

"Nobody bad," Mason replied. "A couple of the black boys got nicked a little, nothing to worry about. My partner, Sam Withrow, has a hole in his arm, but he says he's cut himself worse than that shaving, so I don't reckon we need pay it no mind. I've already tied him up."

LIGHTS were showing on the bluff above. Voices were shouting questions as the aroused villagers hurried from their abodes. Hatfield walked up the trail, the star of the Rangers gleaming on his broad breast.

"Bunch of gun runners," he replied tersely to the questions volleyed at him. "We got some of them. Some got away. I'd take it kind if you folks would rustle a bit of food for my men, and some fodder for our horses. They're tied back in the grove. Also we could use a few blankets if you have 'em to spare. Didn't get any sleep last night. We'll spread 'em in the grove."

A grizzle-haired man pushed forward. "I'm the mayor," he announced. "You and your men can bed down in my warehouse, Ranger, if you're a mind to. You did a good chore. We're honest folks here and don't have any use for law breakers."

"Much obliged," Hatfield replied. "I'll call my boys up."

The good mayor stared somewhat askance as the "boys" made their appearance but he was as good as his word.

Food for men and horses was quickly forthcoming, and a bountiful supply of blankets.

"This is plumb cosy," chuckled big Tom Hartsook as, sometime later, full fed and content, he stretched his big frame on the warehouse floor. "And, man, oh man! there ain't no bars on the windows!"

CHAPTER X

The Long Trail

MOST of the citizens of Sabine were early risers and it was their morning activities that roused the tired possemen from their slumbers. After an ample breakfast, Hatfield led his men to the beach. The mules were loaded with the pack sacks. The dead owlhoots were roped to the saddles of their horses. Then Hatfield sought out the mayor.

"This is Jefferson county, isn't it?" he asked.

"That's right," the official replied.

"And Beaumont is the county seat, I believe," Hatfield continued. "I aim to pack those bodies and the guns to Beaumont and turn 'em over to the sheriff up there."

"Ride a mile to the west and you'll hit a good trail that runs to Beaumont," said the mayor. "Beaumont is about forty miles to the north of here."

Hatfield thanked the mayor and his fellow townsmen for their hospitality and the posse departed amid cheers and hand wavings. They located the trail without difficulty and headed north through a world all glorious with morning.

The good citizens of Beaumont stared in slack-jawed amazement at the grim cavalcade threading its way through their streets. And at the tall, level-eyed man with the Rangers' star on his breast who rode in front. Directions were quickly forthcoming as to the location of the sheriff's office and how to get there. But Hatfield's face and manner forbade questions.

Most astounded of all was the sheriff of the county, a lank old frontiersman, when Hatfield and his singular posse pulled up in front of his door. But when he was acquainted with the facts, he shook hands all around.

"A fine chore," he complimented Hatfield. "A regular Ranger chore, done in the Ranger way. And these boys of yours, they did themselves proud, too. I'll see they're outfitted proper before they head back home. What do you aim to do, Ranger? Stick around a spell?"

"I'm heading west," Hatfield told him. "I'm playing a hunch that steamer will put in at Brownsville, or maybe Port Isabel, though I lean to Brownsville. I want to be there when she shows up."

"Why not telegraph Brownsville to hold her when she shows up?" suggested the sheriff.

"Nothing to hold her on," Hatfield replied. "I'm certain in my own mind that the ship lying outside the bar at Sabine was the same ship that fled out of Galveston, but I have no proof. I didn't see any ship, remember. All I saw was riding lights."

"How about the ruckus in Galveston?" suggested the sheriff. "You might play that angle."

Hatfield shook his head. "Nothing happened in Galveston that could be tied up with her," he explained. "Those seamen who rowed out to her had no hand in the shooting up of the saloon. When the row started, they ran. Just because they happened to be drinking in company with those three cowhands who started the trouble is no proof they had any part in it. They could disavow even knowing those three men. Could say they were but chance acquaintances they met in the saloon. I have no proof to the contrary."

"How about the square-headed man you believe is Juan Cartinas? Why not wire orders to hold him?"

"On what charge?" Hatfield smiled. "Because I think he might be Cartinas, the owlhoot? Nobody seems to know who Cartinas is or what he looks like. I have not the slightest proof that he is Cartinas.

Only suspicion. And you couldn't expect any court to issue a warrant of detention on such a vague surmise. All a try of that sort would do would be to put him on the alert. I'm counting on the chance that he won't figure me to guess where the ship will put in. If I can get there first, I may get a line on what he's up to, or tail him till I really get something on him. And unless that tramp is packing contraband, which I doubt, I have nothing on her either."

WITH wrinkled brow the sheriff considered this. Then he asked another question.

"Wonder why that British freighter didn't pack the guns straight to Brownsville, instead of putting in at Galveston?"

"She couldn't make it up the Rio Grande," Hatfield explained. "The tramp is small and of shallow draught. She can do it at this time of the year. Besides, those guns could not be consigned to this section without careful note being made of it. The Border is a trouble spot and such a shipment would immediately arouse the suspicions of our Government, and the Mexican Government also. The consignee would have to satisfy the authorities as to their intended use, which would be considerable of a task for even a reputable dealer. Those guns are American make, but I'm willing to bet they were consigned by the manufacturer to some European port. Then they were slipped back across the Atlantic. The plan would have been to transship them to the tramp and sneak them in. The only way it could be managed."

"Makes sense," agreed the sheriff. "Funny though, isn't it, that Cartinas should pick the Big Thicket for a hide-out?"

"Not so much so when you think it over a bit," Hatfield replied. "It's a perfect hole-in-the-wall. And there are rich pickings in the surrounding country. Small town banks, railroad trains, stage lines. And plenty of cows that can be run across the Sabine into Louisiana, where there is always a good market for anybody with the proper connections. Cartinas' sort is always badly in need of money to hold his outfit together. A few hauls like the Galveston bank and he would be sitting pretty. If he was an ordinary brush-popping Border owlhoot, he would have stuck to the Border. But he's different and he has vision. He knows this section over here is perfect for his operations for a while."

Hatfield paused to roll a cigarette. The sheriff nodded his understanding.

"And for a hide-out, the Big Thicket is hard to beat," Hatfield resumed. "Remember, Sam Bass and his bunch hung out in the Hickory and Elm bottoms up in Danton county, with Rangers, sheriffs, United States marshals and railroad detectives trying to drop a loop on them. They evaded all that herd of peace-officers for years and kept right on operating. One train robbery netted them sixty thousand dollars. And those bottoms are nothing to the Big Thicket."

"But you nosed out Cartinas' hide-away in the Big Thicket," the sheriff reminded.

"Yes," Hatfield admitted, "but the element of chance played a large part in that. If it hadn't been for that freak tidal wave depositing the freighter out on the range, and Weston and myself stumbling onto it like we did, we might have hunted for Cartinas' hangout for months and never found out. As things worked out, that stranded freighter gave me a definite line on Cartinas and something authentic to work on."

"Wonder how Cartinas found out the freighter was up there?" said the sheriff.

"Not very difficult to figure out," Hatfield replied. "I'd say either Cartinas or one of his trusted lieutenants was aboard the freighter when the hurricane struck. Doubtless conferring with the captain of the ship and making plans for transferring the cargo of guns to the tramp steamer when she showed up. As I gathered in Galveston, all the crew of the freighter had been given shore leave—to get them out of the way, doubtless. After the tidal wave receded and left the ship high and dry, word was gotten to Cartinas to come

and get his shipment. That's what he did, and of course the only place he could cache it was at his hide-out in the Big Thicket."

"You figure Cartinas killed the ship's captain?"

THE ranger nodded. "Guess so," Hatfield agreed. "While he was writing out the receipt for payment for the guns, I'd say. The table looked like a bottle of ink had recently been spilled on it."

"And you think you may get a line on Cartinas in Brownsville?"

"Yes," Hatfield said. "I've a notion he'll head back to the Border. His bunch has been sort of thinned out during the past ten days. Fourteen, altogether, not counting that seaman who got downed in Jethro Wills' cabin. He'll be needing to get another operating outfit together in a hurry, and the only place he can round 'em up is his old stamping ground, the Border country north and south of the Rio Grande. That's what I'm basing my hunch on."

"And what can I do to help you?" asked the sheriff.

"I want to get a train out of here for the Brownsville section, and transportation for my horse, which means I'll have to travel by freight," Hatfield replied. "I want you to try and arrange it for me."

"Reckon I can do that," said the sheriff. "Come on, we'll go over to the railroad offices. Your boys can stay here till we get back. Look after them later."

At the railroad offices, matters were quickly arranged.

"There's a fast freight pulling out for the west in two hours," Hatfield was told. "We can hook an empty boxcar onto it to accommodate your horse. You can ride in the caboose. You'll have to change at Beeville, but we'll wire ahead and arrange for that with the least possible delay. Good luck, Ranger!"

Hatfield thanked the railroad official and returned to the sheriff's office. He shook hands with his possemen and promised to drop in on them some time when circumstances permitted. The freight train left on schedule, bearing Goldy stalled in a boxcar and Hatfield comfortably installed in the caboose.

CHAPTER XI

The Tightening Noose

IT WAS fast, all right, that freight, and Hatfield was confident that he would arrive in Brownsville before the ship could make it across the Gulf, even if she sailed a straight course. The delay at Beeville was negligible and in very short order he was rolling south toward the River port.

The evening of the second day after leaving Beaumont found him loitering around the Brownsville waterfront. He wore a cap, rough woolen trousers and the kind of shoes favored by sailors and longshoremen. A buttoned pea jacket hid his guns and cartridge belts.

Although river traffic had dwindled with the coming of the railroads, Brownsville was still a port of no small consequence. Off the docks lay clumsy side-wheelers that plied the upper stretches of the River, and an occasional shallow-draught Gulf trade steamer. Lighters plied across the Rio Grande to the Mexican town of Matamoros. The waterfront was bustling and cheery and its saloons and eating houses did a roaring business.

For two days, Hatfield hung around the docks. Occasionally he accepted proffered part-time jobs of loading or unloading cargo to explain his continued presence. Part of the time he frequented the saloons, listening to the talk and observing the other patrons. But as the time passed, he began wondering if his hunch had been a straight one, after all. The tramp steamer, if she had really headed for the river port, was long overdue.

And then, just as he was contemplating a ride to Port Isabel at the River's mouth, he spotted the disreputable looking but clean lined vessel nosing her way up the River. She docked, and her gangplank

was lowered. Hatfield watched a few embarkees head for the shore.

Very nearly did he overlook his quarry. Then abruptly he recognized in the massively built individual in a long black coat, snowy shirt front, broad-brimmed black hat and shiny black boots leisurely descending the gang plank, carpet bag in hand, as the man he sought. His lips pursed in a soundless whistle.

"That gent is a quick-change artist for fair," he muttered. "In Galveston he sure looked a seaman. And now he looks the tin-horn gambler to perfection. Got a notion he'd look just as authentic in overalls, chaps and riding boots."

The man in the black coat evidently knew just where he was going. He crossed from the waterfront and walked briskly along Levee Street. Hatfield ambled along some distance behind him and watched him enter a saloon rather more pretentious than others in the locality. The Lone Wolf quickened his pace a little and also pushed through the swinging doors, his cap pulled low over his eyes, his shoulders hunched. A number of waterfront men were drinking or playing cards, and his entrance attracted no attention as he approached the bar and ordered a drink. He instantly spotted his quarry, at the far end of the bar, in conversation with a bullet-headed individual Hatfield rightly divined was the owner of the establishment.

After a few minutes talk, the man in the black coat sat down at a table, removed his hat and ordered a meal.

Hatfield studied him covertly in the back bar mirror. The removed hat showed a big, dome-shaped forehead and a heavy head of brown hair worn slightly long. It was combed in approved gambler fashion. The finely shaped hands were a dealer's hands, Hatfield shrewdly surmised.

NOR was he wrong in his estimate. The man ate in a leisurely fashion, while Hatfield dawdled with his drink and ordered another. The other finally finished eating and rolled a cigarette deftly with the fingers of his left hand, in the manner of a cowhand who often has but one set of fingers to spare for the chore.

Meanwhile the room was filling up, for darkness had fallen outside. The smoker pinched out his cigarette and moved to a big table in the back of the room. He sat down, drew cards from a drawer and removed the wrappings. The bullet-headed proprietor nodded to several drinkers nearby who had a prosperous look. They passed to the big table and took chairs. What was doubtless an all-night poker game got under way.

Standing at the bar, still nursing his second drink, Hatfield did some hard thinking. His estimate of the shrewdness of the man he figured to be Juan Cartinas had risen. The expedient utilized by the bandit leader was so simple and at the same time so effective. As the dealer of a card game he would be able to get into touch with men of his following in a manner that would neither cause comment nor arouse suspicion. An open game in a saloon! Anybody could sit in and in the regular order of procedure, players changed during a night. Very quickly, the dealer could be surrounded by men with whom he wished to confer and plans could be made and information relayed in a manner that would not occasion comment. The set-up was ideal.

At the moment, the Ranger decided, the game consisted of legitimate players. He also decided that doubtless such a condition would obtain for some hours to come. Which would give him an opportunity to put a plan of his own into action. He earnestly desired to get a good look at the mysterious steamer that brought Cartinas to Brownsville. He did not for a moment believe that the trip was made just to provide passage for Cartinas. It was highly unlikely that the tramp would have steamed clear across the Gulf for that purpose. He felt certain that her presence at Brownsville dovetailed with some scheme Cartinas had in mind.

"And if I can find out in advance what that scheme is, I may get a chance to drop my loop on that resourceful gent," he mused as he sauntered out of the saloon

and back to the waterfront.

Hatfield found the wharf alongside which the tramp steamer was docked a scene of activity. The tramp was loading cargo. Bags, bales and crates were being trundled onto the deck by brawny longshoremen, where a loading boom was shunting them down the main hatch to the vessel's hold. Hatfield approached a foreman in charge of operations.

"Want a job, feller?" the foreman asked as Hatfield drew near. "We can use a few more huskies. Double time for this job. Darned old tub is in a hurry to pull out."

A few moments later, Hatfield was manning a small hand truck and one of the stream of toilers conveying cargo items from the dock to the ship.

Very quickly he noticed one or two interesting facts. Crew members were handling the chore of stowing cargo. None of the dock workers being allowed to approach the hatch. Not that this was obvious. But always a member of the ship's crew took over before a trucker was close to the yawning opening in the steamer's deck. Twice Hatfield tried to edge forward enough to get a look down the hatch. But each time he was deftly intercepted and his load taken over.

Another thing he noticed in the course of his trips to and from the wharf. Over to one side, in the shadow cast by the ship's funnel, was a small hatch that was open. Through the opening came a faint glow of light.

GRADUALLY he altered his course as he continued to trundle his loaded truck across the deck. Each trip he drew a little closer to the black shadow of the funnel. The pile of cargo on the wharf was diminishing and only a few more loads were left when Hatfield made his final move. The workers were in a hurry to finish their chore and the deck was crowded with men and trucks. Under cover of the confusion, Hatfield deftly wheeled his load into the shadow. He lowered the handles of his truck and, unnoticed, glided to the opening. He bent over the hatch, peering into the dimly lighted depths. His gaze rested on a rough board flooring some ten feet down.

A rope ladder dangled from the rim of the hatch. With a quick glance around, Hatfield eased his body over the rim. Another moment and he was swiftly descending the ladder. His feet touched the boards and he glanced around.

As he surmised, the ship had a false deck. It was pierced by the wide opening of the main hatch but was otherwise unbroken, extending the length and breadth of the vessel. The rough boards of the flooring were scarred and splintered. Along the sides were long wooden troughs set a few feet above the floor.

All this Hatfield noted in a swift, all-embracing glance. He noted something else, a familiar odor that filled the air of the enclosed space. He glided forward a few steps better to examine the troughs built against the vessel's sides, rounded the bulk of the funnel extending downward through the floor boards, and came face to face with two men.

[Turn page]

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The foremost, a lean and rangy individual, uttered a startled exclamation.

"What the hell you doin' down here?" he demanded in a threatening voice.

Before Hatfield could frame a reply, the second man, who was short and blocky and powerfully built, barked a command:

"Grab him! Don't let him get away!"

The lanky man rushed, fists swinging. Hatfield weaved to one side and hit him with both hands, his left fist sinking deep into the other's middle, his right hooking a smashing blow to the fellow's jaw as he doubled over in agony.

The attacker's feet left the floor and he thudded to the boards to lie motionless, arms wide-flung. But before Hatfield could strike again, the other man was upon him. He caught a gleam of steel, lashed out and gripped a corded wrist before the knife could drive home. Instantly a throttling grip fastened on his throat.

Back and forth the battlers writhed and struggled in grim silence. Hatfield was far the taller but the other was nigh as broad as he was long and seemed to be made of steel wire. Try as he would, Hatfield could not break the grip on his throat. He smashed the other in the face with his free hand, jolted his ribs with short punches that drew gasps from the man's lips. But still that strangling grip tightened and tightened on his throat. Red flashes stormed before his eyes. His lungs were congested, his heart pounded madly. And still the grip tightened. And at the same time, the knife hand descended inch by straining inch.

With a last prodigious expenditure of his remaining strength, Hatfield hurled himself backward. Off balance, he fell, to hit the floor boards with a bone-creaking jar, dragging his attacker with him. As the man's feet left the floor, Hatfield's left leg drove upward, rigid as a rod of iron. The sole of his heavy shoe caught the other squarely in the midriff. With a gasping cry, he shot over the Ranger's head. His gripping fingers furrowed the skin of Hatfield's throat as their grip was torn free. With a crash that seemed to rock the ship he hit the floor.

HATFIELD scrambled to his feet. His head was reeling, his breath coming in great gulps. For an instant he stood rocking on his heels, then he staggered to the rope ladder. He paused for one swift, all-embracing glance around the shadowy interior and noted what he had missed before. Along one side of the vessel was a ponderous windlass arrangement with heavy chains leading to massive steel eyes just under the upper deck. There were two of the eyes about fifteen feet apart. Just outside the eyes were lines of jointure vertically cutting the side plates from the upper to the lower deck. The chains were drawn taut around the barrels of the windlass. Hatfield studied the contraption an instant, then went up the ladder, hand over hand, his strength returning as he neared the fresh air. He clambered onto the deck, saw that the loading was finished, the gangplank being raised. He dashed forward, bounded up the sloping plank and leaped across the opening where the vessel's side lurched and ground against the piling of the dock.

For a terrible instant he thought he had leaped short. But his feet hit the surface of the wharf inches from the water's edge. He lurched forward, stumbled, recovered himself by a miracle of agility. On the ship's deck sounded yells and a storm of cursing. Hatfield dived forward into the jostling throng of longshoremen who were hurrying from the wharf.

"Blazes, feller, you came nigh onto gettin' shanghaied, didn't you?" chuckled one. "Shouldn't have took that chance of jumpin'. If you'd gone down the crack, you'd have been ground to a pulp. You was just due for a ride across the river, anyhow. The blasted tub is pullin' over to Matamoros on the oiler side of the River, to load over there. Come on and have a drink. You look like you need it. How'd you get your neck scratched that way?"

He rubbed his sore neck, gingerly and laughed. "It's nothing."

Hatfield joined his new acquaintance, a jovial and talkative individual, in a drink.

"Funny old tub, that Atlanta," re-

marked the longshoreman, tilting his glass. "You'd think the crew are all deaf-and-dumb fellers. About all you can get out of 'em is grunts. And when they come ashore, they stick to themselves. Never mix with the boys, like most crews do. An uppity bunch, all right. She's been puttin' in here for quite a while now. Loads hides and cotton and sometimes vegetable truck. Then she always slides across the River to fill out her ladin'. Oiler friends of mine who work over there told me she always loads baled hay and some alfalfa over there. No wonder she smells like a stable. And she's always in one hell of a hurry to finish up here."

Hatfield listened with interest while the other rambled on. After a while he said good-by and left the waterfront place. He went at once to the big saloon on Levee Street.

The poker game was still in progress, although it was nearly morning, but different players occupied the chairs. Hatfield noted with interest that three men in cowhand garb now held cards. A few minutes after he entered, one of these cashed in his chips and left the saloon. A little later, the dealer leveled off the stacks of chips in front of him and motioned to the proprietor. He said a few words, the proprietor nodded, and another dealer approached to occupy the chair. The square-headed man retrieved his carpet bag from where he had stowed it back of the bar and left the saloon without a glance to right or left. Hatfield waited a moment, then sauntered out. His man was walking down Levee Street toward the waterfront. However, he turned east on Thirteenth Street and continued to the corner of Elizabeth Street. Here he entered the rather pretentious Miller Hotel. Through the plate-glass window, Hatfield watched him register at the desk and ascend the stairs from the lobby.

"Going to bed," the Lone Wolf decided, "and I reckon that's what I'd better do. Reckon I've got him holed up for a while. Goes it strong, all right. No second-rate hangouts for him. Only goes to the best in town."

JIM HATFIELD chuckled to himself as he entered his own humble waterfront rooming house. The Miller Hotel, he was forced to admit, was not exactly the kind of establishment that catered to longshoremen. He doubted, however, that Cartinas, if the dealer really was Cartinas, would sleep any sounder.

Hatfield did sleep soundly enough, for several hours. Before noon, he was up and busy. He called on the agent in charge of customs. The agent looked rather askance at the towering figure in the rough garments of a longshoreman. But the Star of the Rangers quickly brought a smile to his face and a willingness to answer questions.

"I want to talk about that tramp steamer which docked here last night—the Atlanta," Hatfield told him. "What do you know about her?"

"Why, nothing in particular," the official replied. "She has put in here several times during the past year. She loads hides and cotton and tallow, usually, all inspected and in good order. Consigned to Mobile, Alabama, and Gulf Port, Mississippi, for the most part."

"Ever load cattle here?" Hatfield asked.

"Why, no," the agent answered. "Not that I have any recollection of. I'll check to make sure."

"Well," Hatfield said, "she has a false deck outfitted to handle cattle, and she's rank with the smell of them. Been cows between those decks very recently."

"Doubtless she puts in at other ports," the agent pointed out. "She could load them there."

"That's logical," Hatfield admitted. "But why does she always load hay and alfalfa at Matamoras, across the River?"

The agent admitted he had no answer for that one.

Hatfield was silent for a moment, the concentration furrow deep between his black brows.

"When did she dock here last?" he asked suddenly.

The agent thumbed his records.

"On the thirtieth of last month," he said.

"Ten days before the big hurricane that devastated Galveston," Hatfield remarked.

"That's so," agreed the agent. "We felt that blow over here, but of course we caught only the outer fringe."

"And I suppose she loaded quickly and crossed to Matamoros?"

"Yes, I believe that's right," replied the agent.

"And she loaded here for Mobile or Gulf Port?"

The agent checked his records again. "Mobile," he said.

Hatfield nodded. "That checks about right," he replied. "Plenty of time for her to cross the Gulf and show back at Galveston when she did. Now here's what I want you to do. I want you to keep constant watch on that ship. As soon as it is dark, put two of your men on the River in a small boat. They'd better drop over close to the Mexican shore. The River is high at present. Tell them, if that ship moves from anchorage during the night to note her course carefully and report to the sheriff's office at once. I'm going to see the sheriff now. I'm beginning to have a notion about this business, and if it works out right, you'll be rid of a gent you can very well do without—Juan Cartinas."

The agent whistled. "Juan Cartinas!" he exclaimed. "You're darn right we can do without him. I hear things in this office. I hear that Cartinas is all set to stage big trouble for the Border country."

"He isn't as well set as he figured to be about now," Hatfield returned grimly, "and because of that I figure he'll pull something that will tip his hand. Thanks, very much, suh, for your help. I'm going to see the sheriff."

BEFORE visiting the sheriff's office, Hatfield returned to his room. He removed his longshoreman's garb and laid it away, having decided that it had served its purpose. Then minutes later he left the room in rangeland costume, his double cartridge belts around his sinewy waist, his heavy guns snugged in the carefully worked and oiled cut-out holsters, his bronzed, slender hands never far away from the plain black butts. He hunted up the sheriff's office, found the sheriff in and introduced himself.

The old peace officer shook hands, regarding with interest and respect the man whose exploits were legendary throughout the southwest.

"So McDowell sent you over here to round up Cartinas, eh?" he observed. "Got a line on him?"

"Yes, I believe I have," Hatfield replied. "But dropping a loop on him is liable to be considerable of a chore. I want you to give me a hand with that when the time comes."

"Anything I can do to help hogtie that snake-blooded galoot will be a plumb pleasure," the sheriff declared with emphasis.

"Been bothered much with widelooping hereabouts of late?" Hatfield asked.

"We sure have," the sheriff growled. "This has always been a hot spot, but the past six months has been the worst ever."

"Recollect if anything in particular happened around the thirtieth of last month?" Hatfield asked.

The sheriff tugged his mustache and wrinkled his brow. "By golly, yes," he exclaimed. "That was the night old Cale Worthing of the Runnin' W lost three hundred head of prime shippin' stuff. We trailed the devils to the River bank. How they got them cows across without drownin' 'em is beyond me, with the Rio Grande on the rampage like it is this time of the year, but they did."

Hatfield smiled slightly and his eyes glowed with satisfaction. The loose ends of his hunch were tieing up.

"They didn't cross the river," he told the sheriff.

The old peace-officer stared. "Then where the blazes do they go?" he demanded.

"Down the River and across the Gulf," Hatfield said. Briefly he recounted what he had seen on the tramp steamer.

"That ship packs the cows," he concluded. "Three hundred head you said that raid netted? At about twenty dol-

lars per head, which is what prime stuff like that will bring, it sums up to considerable dinero. Hauls like that pay. Outfits hereabouts have been losing cows lately, I reckon."

"Yes," said the sheriff. "Little bunches here and there."

"Little bunches holed up somewhere, enough of them, make for a nice shipping herd," Hatfield replied. "Yes, it's a cute scheme, all right, and sort of a new wrinkle in rustling. Of course cows have been loaded onto River boats and disposed of locally. Nothing new about that. But running 'em across the Gulf is a new notion, or I'm a heap mistook. The sort of thing you could expect from a man like Cartinas. But he slipped a mite on some little things, as the owlhoot brand always does. Loading feed at Matamoros was one of them. I figure the ship will slide up the River tonight and be all set to pack off the cows Cartinas' men have been collecting while he was over east."

"You don't think they might get suspicious from those two sailors catching you on the ship?"

"Don't think so," Hatfield replied. "I see no reason for those fellers to think I was anything other than what I looked to be—a dock worker nosing around. If they had gotten suspicious, I figure she wouldn't be lying across the River at Matamoros. She would have pulled out already. Well, you might as well get your posse together, and then there's nothing to do but wait till we get word from those Customs men that she's moving."

CHAPTER XII

Round-up

UNDER a lowering sky, all day long, the tramp lay at anchor on the far side of the Rio Grande. Dark closed down with fog and a misty rain that obscured all things. Not even her riding lights were visible from the Brownsville side of the river.

"Made to order for the devils," grumbled the sheriff. "She could go anywhere without being seen, in this blasted soup."

"Made to order for us, too, that is if our Customs men don't fail us," Hatfield replied. "I figure she'll head up the River. Know any place to the west of here she'd be likely to put in?"

The sheriff pondered a moment. "About eight miles to the west," he said, "is an old landin' platform with a road coming down to it from what used to be the old Santa Rita ranch. It ain't used hardly at all any more, but it's still in good shape. I'd say if you're right about what you figure, right there is where they'd be most apt to load the cows. A trail runs right along the river bank from here—leads right up to where that road comes down. Brush country full of leopard cats and Mexican lions, and the biggest rattlesnakes you ever saw."

"Sounds about right for bagging a whole nest of snakes," Hatfield observed. "Soon

[*Turn page*]

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as we get word from the Customs men, we'll take that trail. The brush should help us to sneak up on them if they do use that landing."

A little later, Hatfield paid a brief visit to the saloon on Levee Street. He was not at all surprised to note that another dealer was filling the chair at the big poker table. Cartinas was nowhere evident.

"Which means, I hope, that he'll be supervising the loading in person," Hatfield said to the sheriff.

It wanted two hours of midnight when a man came hurrying into the office, panting and breathless, his oilskins glistening with rain drops.

"She's on the move!" he exclaimed. "Headin' up the river without lights. She came nigh to foolin' us. Upped anchor and slid downstream with lights burnin' all regular. We drifted along next to the shore like Mr. Hatfield told us to do. Easy, with the current strong like it is out there. Well, she steamed on around the bend for a couple of miles. All of a sudden she doused her glims. She turned and came churnin' up the river, half speed. We hugged the shore and she passed us. Of course we couldn't keep up with her against the current. So soon as we couldn't hear her engines any more we headed across for town."

"Good chore," Hatfield complimented the Customs man. "Now, Sheriff, it's up to us. Let's go."

Along the trail that hugged the river bank the posse rode at a good pace, guns ready for instant action. Straggling brush lined the trail on either side and to their ears came the growl and mutter of the swollen stream.

"Can't see anything in this infernal murk," grumbled the sheriff. "And can't hear anything because of the racket that blasted river is makin'."

"But if your hunch about the landing platform is straight, we don't need to," Hatfield pointed out. "Anyhow, she can't put into shore without us knowing it, and that's what counts. I figure we should make the landing platform as soon as she does, perhaps a little before. If nothing is in sight when we get there, we'll hang around a spell. If she doesn't show in a reasonable time, we'll keep riding till we spot her. Now everybody keep quiet, and use your ears."

SILENCE followed, save for the sucking of the horses' hoofs on the muddy trail, the moan of the wind and the grumble of the river. Finally the sheriff spoke, in a low tone:

"Less than half a mile to that landin' point. The brush thins out a bit beyond the next turn and we'd ought to be able to see her, if she's there."

Hatfield slowed the pace a trifle and they rode alert and watchful.

Five minutes later, Hatfield's keen eyes detected a tiny glow some distance ahead.

"There she is," he told the sheriff. "She's put in at the landing and is showing signal lights. Get set."

"Goin' to grab her first off?" asked the sheriff.

"No," Hatfield replied. "I want the cows aboard before we make a move. I don't want her slipping out of our noose on a technicality. So far we still haven't a thing on her. No law against her steaming up the river and putting in here. Unless we grab her with contraband aboard, we'll have no case against her that will stand up in court. But we've got to work fast when we start. If she manages to get under way, we'll lose her. I didn't have time to arrange for a revenue cutter to be at the mouth of the river to intercept her. And she's engined like a cruiser. Once out on the Gulf and she's gone. She'll unload somewhere in a hurry and when she's finally run down, there won't be a thing against her. Besides, the riders will be bunched behind the herd, except for point and flank men. We've got to get them all together down here on the bank or some of 'em are liable to give us the slip."

"Goin' to leave the horses?" the sheriff asked.

"No," Hatfield replied again, "we may need them. If the bunch scatters we'll

have to run them down. And if Cartinas is with them, he'll not be taken alive. Nothing will be too desperate for him to attempt in order to escape. Look! They've let down that hinged section of the ship's side to form a perfect loading chute. A lantern on each side of the gangway. Okay, we're close enough. Hole up here in the brush."

A long and tedious wait followed, with nerves strained to the breaking point. Each posseman was poised to grip his horse's nose should the animal take a notion to neigh. An occasional jingle of bit irons seemed unduly loud, though it was highly unlikely that the sound could be heard above the rush of the river and the soughing of the wind.

Then abruptly another sound became apparent. Again it came, still thin with distance, the querulous bleating of a tired and disgusted steer.

"Get set," Hatfield whispered. "Here they come."

Five tense minutes passed, with the bawling of the approaching herd growing steadily louder. On the road leading to the loading platform a shadowy mass became visible. A moment later and the glow of the lanterns glinted on clashing horns and rolling eyes. Expertly, two point men guided the leaders of the herd onto the platform and up the broad gangplank formed by the hinged section of the ship's plates. The thudding of hoofs sounded loud on the metal surface.

And without warning a blaze of light abruptly made the scene as bright as day. The steamer's searchlight had been turned on. High above the shaggy, steaming back of the cattle shot the white bar of radiance, glittering the raindrops, outlining nearly a dozen horsemen bringing up the rear of the herd. Forward they swept, a squat broad-shouldered figure mounted on a splendid black horse in the lead.

UP THE gangplank slogged the last of the herd. The riders pulled up on the loading platform, bunched together.

"Let's go!" Hatfield said. He sent his great golden horse charging forward. His voice rolled in thunder above the roar of the swollen river and the moaning of the wind:

"In the name of the State of Texas! I arrest Juan Cartinas and others for murder and robbery. Anything—"

His voice was drowned in a chorus of startled yells and bellows of gunfire.

Shooting hard and straight, the posse surged forward. The tangled mob on the platform was in a panic of wild confusion. Saddles were emptied. Bodies thudded on the boards. Horses' irons clashed and thundered as the frantic animals strove to escape from the hideous pandemonium in which they were embroiled. There sounded a creaking of chains and a clang of metal as the shipmen strove madly to raise the gangplank.

Through the wild tangle on the platform charged Cartinas' great black horse. His irons clattered on the rising gangplank and he shot into the yawning opening of the loading hatch in the vessel's side, his bulky rider bending low in the saddle.

Instantly, Hatfield's voice rang out: "Trail, Goldy, trail!"

The tall sorrel raced forward. Hatfield veered him as he struck the platform. With a soaring leap he was on the gangplank. Already its surface was sloping inward. As Hatfield swayed far to one side and down, the edge of the upper deck swept his hat from his head and grazed his skull.

Then they were through, and in the midst of the maddened, milling herd, Hat-

NEXT ISSUE—JIM HATFIELD IN

TRAIL OF HUNTED MEN

By JACKSON COLE

field hunched low in the cramped space.

At the windlass, two men were working frantically, straining to raise the gangplank so the ship could get under way. Hatfield snapped a shot at them. With frightened yells they dropped the levers and dived for cover. The windlass barrel spun in reverse. A flailing bar struck one of the men and hurled him senseless to the deck. His companion's scream of despair knifed through the turmoil as he went down amid the terrified cows.

A bullet fanned Hatfield's face. Another ripped the sleeve of his shirt. Juan Cartinas, his face a mask of rage and hate, was shooting with both hands as his black horse fought to keep his footing and screamed as needle-pointed horns raked his flanks and sides.

Hatfield's guns let go in roaring thunder. Behind him hoofs clashed and clattered as the outlaws sought to take refuge on the ship. But the posse was close at their heels. The packed space quivered to the bellow of guns. Powder smoke swirled and eddied. And through the howling murk, Hatfield and the bandit leader blasted death at one another.

One of Hatfield's guns was empty. He slammed it into its holster, seized Goldy's bridle with an iron grip and for an instant held the sorrel steady. Smoke wisped from the muzzle of his remaining Colt. The reports blended in a drumroll of sound.

Juan Cartinas threw both arms wide, his guns dropping from nerveless fingers. He reeled sideways and fell beneath the churning hoofs of the cattle. In a moment he was but a bloody pulp of smashed bones and mangled flesh.

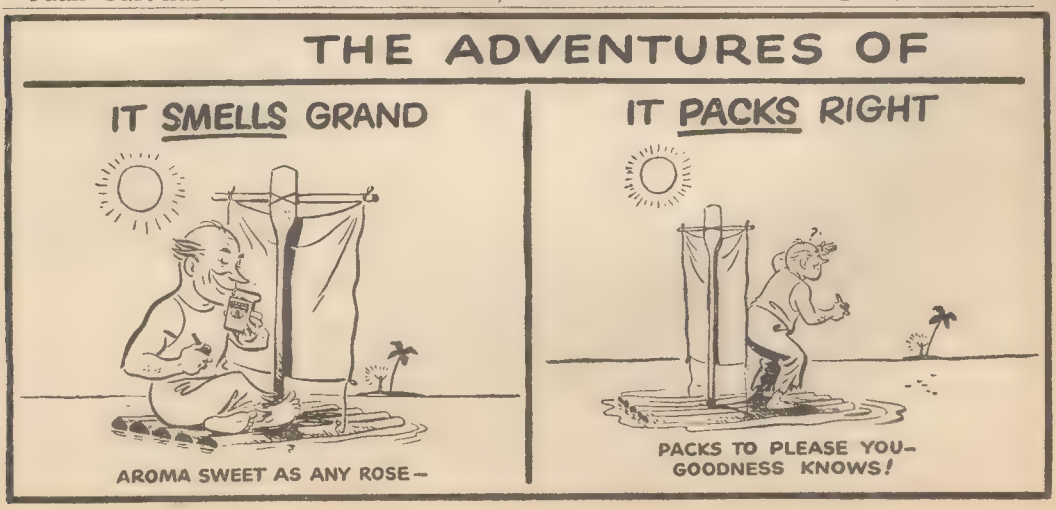
Hatfield, shoving fresh cartridges into his empty guns, was suddenly aware that the shooting behind him had ceased. The sheriff's voice rose in a triumphant whoop, was drowned by a pulsing roar. The ship lurched and quivered. Her captain was taking the desperate chance of getting her under way with the yawning opening in her side but inches above the water level.

DIRECTLY ahead was the open main cargo hatch. Hatfield sent Goldy surging forward, his great bulk hurling the packed cattle aside. The Ranger rose in his stirrups, gripped the coping of the hatch and with a mighty swing of his long body went through the opening and hit the deck on all fours. As he scrambled to his feet, a gun blazed on the bridge and the slug grazed his arm. He flung up his own Colt and thumbed the trigger.

A cry of agony echoed the report. Hatfield bounded up the steps to the wheel house. The helmsman dropped the spokes with a yell of fear as the Lone Wolf's towering form smashed through the door.

"Grab that wheel! Hold her against the bank!" Hatfield thundered, lining sights with the terrified sailor. "Now signal your engine room to stop those engines."

Another moment and quiet, aside from



the bedlam still boiling between the decks, blanketed the ship.

The possemen were clambering over the rail, now. Foremost was the sheriff. Hatfield stepped from the wheel-house and shouted to him.

"We got 'em," the sheriff shouted back. "Four prisoners, two with holes in their hides. Now what?"

"Round up the crew of this vessel and bunch them on deck," Hatfield replied. "I've got to get my horse out of that mess below."

"He's already out," chuckled the sheriff. "And so is Cartinas' black. They come out like scared bats out of the place General Sherman said war was. Scratched up a mite but not hurt bad. Two of the boys are holdin' the cows in."

"Okay," Hatfield replied. "And detail some crew members to close that loading hatch. Then we'll lock 'em below and post a guard till the Customs folks can get up here and take charge of this tub. That's their chore, and I reckon ours is about finished. Anybody bad hurt?"

"Nothin' to worry about," said the sheriff as he hurried off to carry out Hatfield's orders. The Ranger leaned against the wheel house and rolled a cigarette. He was smoking quietly when the sheriff returned.

"Everything under control," said the sheriff. "Don't reckon there's enough left of Cartinas for buryin'. The cows took care of him proper. He was Cartinas, all right. The prisoners admit it. They're talkin' their heads off and have already told me where to round up the owl hoots Cartinas has been trainin' to fight the Border war he was plannin'."

"Forget them," Hatfield advised. "With Cartinas gone they'll bust up and go home."

"Reckon you're right," the sheriff agreed. "Looks like we won't have no Border war, this time."

"No," Hatfield said quietly, "not this time. But sooner or later it will come. There is a bitterly misgoverned country south of the River. Time will come when a real leader will arise and the people of Mexico will set their house in order. There'll be blood and flame from the Gulf to the Pacific, but out of it all will come a new and a free Mexico that will stand shoulder to shoulder with America in time of trouble. Well, guess we'd better be heading for town. I want to get back to the Post as soon as I can. Captain Bill will have another little chore lined up for me, the chances are."

He ceased speaking and stood gazing eastward through the rain, his eyes somber but with a slight smile touching his stern mouth.

"What you thinkin' about, feller?" the sheriff asked curiously.

"Ranger Cliff Weston, who died up there by that stranded freighter," Hatfield replied. "Reckon he can sleep easy now." • • •

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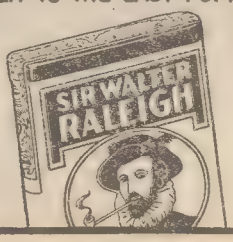

It costs no more to get the Best!

by RALPH YERGEN

VENGEANCE ON THE HOOF

The hurt and the hate of a maltreated animal spun through the black colt Sky-High, bringing defiance and fear

IN A MOMENT of forgetfulness, Sky-high, the black three-year-old colt, rubbed his itching nose on Bard Buksul's shoulder. Buksul wheeled his thick frame. His sullen eyes grew muddy. His voice crackled with an explosive temper Sky-high had come to fear.

"Keep your dirty black snout off'n me, you fence-jumpin' son-of-a-bullfrog!"

Sky-high jerked his head back, but was too late to avoid the balled fist driving at him. Pain roared through his nose. Blood

drizzled from his nostrils. He pulled back until the halter rope stretched tight as a fiddle string from the lodgepole pine.

Bard Buksul's blunt fingers compressed the knot with a savage yank. He cursed, socked his fist against the colt's bruised nose again. His tobacco-dyed lips twisted cruelly.

"That's for reefin' on the rope."

The hurt and the hate of a mistreated animal spun through Sky-high, whipping up a quick flare of defiance. His ears flattened. As Buksul turned away, Sky-high nipped lightly at his arm.

With a roar of rage, Bard Buksul leaped clear. Black fire filled his eyes. He cursed the horse in a thick voice.

He ripped up his sleeve and examined the tooth marks on his muscle-knotted arm. The skin was barely scratched. A single drop of blood oozed to the surface.

Face like a thundercloud, he strode heavily to the barn.

Fear began to ice its way through Sky-high. He crowded back as far as the short halter rope would allow him. Memories of his treatment at the hands of Bard Buksul the past two weeks stormed into his mind. He sensed far worse coming.

No such abuse had been heaped on Sky-high during the first three years of his existence, spent on the grass-rich Flat C ranch. Alf Lemon, the Flat C owner, had grown exasperated by the black colt's habit of hopping over fences that blocked all other ranch horses. This playful pastime had earned Sky-high his name. He enjoyed jumping and saw no reason why he should not indulge in the sport.

WHEN the spring-legged colt landed in Mrs. Lemon's garden and thoughtlessly trampled her vegetables, the Flat C owner blew up. He peddled Sky-high to the first bidder, who happened to be Bard Buksul.

Buksul brought the horse to this remote hang-out deep in the Pohonk Hills. The man lived alone and apparently did no work. After Sky-high had cleared the corral fence with ease, Buksul had tied his head down to his forelegs. Today the man had removed that torturing fetter, and for the first time in a week Sky-high could lift his head.

He held his head very high now as he watched Bard Buksul come out of the barn and plod toward him. Buksul carried a coiled blacksnake. His face was bleak. He was muttering in a low, thick voice.

"I'll whale the black gizzard out of your ornery carcass, nag. By the gods, you won't be so fast about bitin' a man again!"

Sky-high danced nervously as he eyed the man's approach. He wished he were back on the Flat C where the hostlers were stern but never cruel.

Suddenly the whip crackled through the air like lightning. It whacked sharply on Sky-high's hide. A thousand arrows of sickening pain pierced him.

Sky-high leaped, but the halter rope snubbed his movement. Again the whip lashed him across the rump. Pain shot along his nerves. A squeal of agony quavered through his nostrils.

Again and again that blacksnake came slashing, exploding, slicing his flesh raw. Crazed by the pain, he jumped and rolled and churned up a fog of dust. He fought the halter and tried to snap the rope, but the strands were new and strong. The tree shivered under his lunges, but he could not bend the sturdy trunk.

Raw, blistering pain boiled through Sky-high. It burned up his strength. He stumbled, sank to his knees groaning.

At last Bard Buksul wearied of wielding the whip. "That ought to learn you," he puffed. "But to make plumb sure—you can stay tied to that tree for a week with not a damned thing to eat!"

The black colt's wounds slowly healed, leaving his glossy back criss-crossed with scars. But the gnawing hunger in his stomach increased. The few grass tufts he managed to reach he pulled up and ate, roots and all.

Day after day, Sky-high strained at the rope, unable to reach the lush green growth only a few feet away. Whenever the breeze wafted from the slopes the fragrance of ripening bluestem, his mouth

watered and his nostrils quivered and his grinding hunger increased.

His sides began to resemble a washboard. Buksul brought him only enough water to keep him alive. Finally he quit trying to break that new rope and drooped beneath the tree.

Late one afternoon a horse and rider came thundering up the trail and plowed to a halt in front of Buksul's cabin. Sky-high lifted an ear and watched them with dull interest.

The rider was a weasel-faced man who twitched nervously in the saddle. His sharp eyes kept darting backtrail. Two pistols hooked back from his narrow thighs like horns. Foam caked the rangy bay horse, who stood spraddle-legged, head down and sides heaving.

Bard Buksul emerged from the cabin and bellowed a profane greeting. The weasel-like man swung groundward, clutching a fat oilskin bag. Both men went inside.

The next minute, Bard Buksul lumbered out the back door, hustled to the barn and reappeared with a heaping pan of oats. He slid the pan under Sky-high's nose and said, "Down it, you son-of-a-bat." Buksul rushed back into the cabin.

Sky-high gulped the oats in mighty mouthfuls. He had scooped up the last kernel when Buksul and the newcomer came out of the house.

THE nervous man was wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He still carried the bag. Buksul was stuffing something shiny into his pockets. They confronted Sky-high, and the newcomer eyed him narrowly.

"Skinny critter," he squeaked. "For five hundred I want a hoss which can cut the breeze."

"Only nag I got right now," Buksul lied. "Your bay is done, Sid. Better take this colt if you don't want to walk."

Sid Tweedie cast a furtive glance backtrail. "Reckon I got no choice, Buksul. I ain't sure I shook that posse. They might come piling around that point any second. Peel off my kak and clamp it on this bucket of bones."

While Buksul saddled Sky-high, the fugitive kept on talking.

"If this plug don't tote me fast and far, I'm takin' part of that five hundred out of your hide next time I see you, Bard. I depend on you for a fresh nag every time I pull a job over Fur Lodge way. You ain't failed me yet. But I don't know about this scarecrow. Looks like he ain't eaten for a week. Why in hell don't you feed your nags? You charge enough for loanin' 'em."

"This colt is naturally lean," Buksul argued. "He'll run if you whale the sap out of him. You can ride him till he drops. I don't care. When he's done, leave him near some ranch over on the west slope. I'll pick him up later."

Still freezing tight to the oilskin bag, Sid Tweedie slammed himself into the saddle and jerked the reins so tight that the bit sawed blood from Sky-high's mouth. He grabbed the quirt Buksul tossed.

"If that posse comes this way, you know what to tell 'em, Bard."

"Sure." Buksul grinned evilly. "I saw you heading due south. Good luck, Sid. I'll hide your winded bay in the brush."

Strengthened by the oats, Sky-high responded to the sharp bite of spur steel with a plunge that almost unloaded the outlaw. He was glad to leave Bard Buksul far behind.

Horse and rider delved northward into a crowded jumble of sky-piercing peaks. The climb over the first high shoulder taxed Sky-high's weakened condition. His steps grew shorter, his breathing more labored. The man in the saddle cursed and roweled relentlessly.

Sky-high put his valiant best into the climb, but when they finally topped the crest he was near to exhaustion. Instead of allowing him a rest, Sid sent him pell-mell downslope with a sharp thwack of the whip.

The downgrade gave Sky-high a chance to catch his second wind. But the steepness of the next ridge soon robbed him of it. With the creeping dusk, the outlaw

semed to grow more restless, more impatient. The stinging fire of the whip scorched Sky-high's rump more frequently.

Mountain night rolled over the Pohonks, chill and dismal. Timber wolves howled from the forest shades. Bobcats squalled in the canyons. From some distant ridge the scream of a cougar threw cold fear into Sky-high.

The outlaw steered Sky-high westward, threading a deep crack in the hills. The colt plodded forward on sheer courage alone. Iron bands seemed to constrict his lungs. Every fiber within him cried out for rest and food.

Whenever he tried to nip at a tuft of grass, a sharp jerk of the reins ripped a deeper furrow in his bleeding mouth.

A TRICKLE of water they were following swelled into a sizeable flow. Forks forged, and the stream became a clear river with frothy rapids and still, deep pools.

The trail ran along a narrow ledge. Below, a wall of stone dropped away twenty feet to the river.

At that point, Sky-high stumbled, slipped to his knees. His sides were heaving furiously. His heart thundered against his ribs. Strength had deserted his legs.

Under the power of Sid Tweedie's wrist, the quirt rose and fell. Sky-high squealed in agony.

"Get up, you lazy heap of bones!" Tweedie raved. "You ain't lying down on me in this hell-hole. Get up. Or I'll bat your hind end off."

Pure desperation drove through the horse. He had to get up. He had to do something. Anything to get away from the hellish torture of that whip.

Some hidden reserve of strength came to his aid. He labored to his feet. A spur steel knifed his ribs, his head and forelegs came up in swift movement.

Sid Tweedie yelped in alarm. With a savage haul on the reins he tried to turn the colt's head. But Sky-high was chancing everything on a wild effort to break clear of that devil on his back.

In a twisting leap, the horse sailed out into space. For an instant he seemed to hang in mid-air, the man on his back frozen with terror.

The mirror-smooth surface of the river seemed to rush up. It smashed against Sky-high's belly. The outlaw screamed. From the distant cliffs the sound echoed shrill and hideous.

Water roared over Sky-high, cold and soothing to his wounds. He plunged deep into the pool, but failed to strike bottom. When he buoyed to the surface, he snorted water out of his nostrils and pulled in deep gusts of air. The cold shock seemed to stimulate him, and he swam steadily toward the sandy bank opposite the ledge trail.

His hoofs soon struck gravel, and he clambered out of the water on a flat area. Empty stirrups flopped against his ribs. He shook water like a wet dog and looked back.

Sid Tweedie floundered in the pool's center. He was yelling in a voice hoarse with terror.

"Help! Help! Somebody save me. I'm drowning. I can't swim!"

Sky-high watched him without feeling.

The echoes of the man's cries came bouncing back through the night to mock him. He threshed the water wildly, churning it to white foam. But he made no progress in any direction. Finally he swirled under the surface. When he bobbed up again, his voice was half strangled.

"Save me! I'm dying. Help! Oh, God—"

Again the river swallowed him, choking his outcries. His head came up once more, briefly. He emitted a final frenzied gasp, then sank to reappear no more.

Sky-high turned away. He took two uncertain steps and halted. Suddenly he was deathly sick.

Chills raced through him. He could not stop shivering. The night air seemed to turn bitter cold.

Green foliage was near. But he was no longer hungry. He was too sick.

Time semed to slow down and stand still. After an interval a tiny flame glowed in the downsteam distance. Sky-high watched it brighten.

SOON he observed a tall, white-haired man approaching with long strides. A lantern swung from the man's hand. He called out in a deep, pleasant, reassuring voice.

"Who hollered? Who yelled for help?"

Only the echoes replied. The man came along the pool's edge. The lantern shone dimly over the river's dark surface. A trout's leap stirred faint ripples on the water.

"Where are you?" the man called.

"Where are you?" the echoes rocketed back.

Suddenly the man confronted Sky-high.

"Empty saddle," he murmured to himself. "Horse wringing wet. Shakin' from the cold water. Looks like he fell into the river from the cliff trail. Must have slipped on the rocks. But where in tophet is the rider?"

The man continued to call out at intervals as he searched the stream banks. Finally he wandered back to Sky-high who had not moved.

Breathing a sigh of defeat, he grasped the colt's reins. "Reckon your rider's a goner, black hoss. But you'll get cared for, anyhow. Come along, boy."

Still shivering, Sky-high dragged himself along at the man's heels. They rounded a sharp bend in the canyon, and the lights of a log house gleamed in the colt's eyes.

Beyond the house, the terrain widened into a meadow-like expanse stretching far down the river. From the pasture land, the lowing of cattle drifted through the night. The fragrance of curing hay filled Sky-high's nostrils. It reminded him of his early days on the Flat C.

The cabin door swung open, and a girl came out to meet them. She was about sixteen, trim and slender in overalls and sweater. Her blonde hair was braided in long queues. Her greenish eyes widened when she spotted Sky-high and his empty saddle.

"What happened, Pop?"

Pop Wade explained all he knew. "Too dark to look any further tonight. Come daylight I'll try and find him."

"A nice colt," the girl said, judging Sky-high with keen interest. Quickly, a look of deep concern clouded her clear young face. "But he's sick, Pop. Look at him shake."

"You're right, Kitty. I'll take him to the lean-to."

"I'll bring out blankets. And heat some rocks in the fireplace," Kitty called back, as she rushed toward the house.

Unsaddled, Sky-high dropped on the old hay under the lean-to roof. Chills were chasing each other through his body in a wild frenzy he could not control. Pop Wade offered him oats, but he could not eat. Groaning softly, he laid his head on the hay.

Kitty Wade dashed out with her arms full of blankets. They swathed Sky-high like a baby. And then Kitty brought hot rocks and laid them against the blankets. The stroking of her warm hands on his neck soothed him.

"He's so sick, Pop. Will he get well?"

By the lantern light Pop Wade looked worried. "No doubt he was in a sweat when he fell in the river. But it don't seem the cold water alone would make him this way. He's skin and bones—like he'd been half starved."

"Did you see those whip scars all over him?" Kitty said hotly. "Somebody's been beating this colt half to death. I'd like to catch the rat over a gunsight."

"Easy, Kitty," Pop Wade said. "You can't shoot a man for abusing his horse—though it'd be a pleasure sometimes."

"I can't understand anyone being so cruel. Is it just because the horse can't fight back?"

"Mostly, I reckon. Some people have so much devil in 'em they exult in torturin' other critters. They're the same brand that start wars."

Kitty shook her head. "Even coyotes are more respectable."

ALL through the night the tireless girl carried hot rocks to Sky-high's side. Finally toward dawn the chills vanished. And then raging flame seemed to consume him.

Somehow the girl knew. She rolled away the rocks and laid a damp cloth against his nostrils.

Cold, misty dawn came creeping along the river. Shadows backed away from the Wade ranch buildings to hide in the deep glades. The fire inside Sky-high seemed to fade slowly with the night.

When the sun spilled its golden flood into the valley, the black colt could raise his head.

"Pop, we saved him!" Kitty yelled joyously.

Pop Wade came out of the cabin yawning. "You mean you saved him—while I snored. Kitty, you're a plumb fine young horse doctor."

At noon, Sky-high was munching oats. Nightfall found him on his feet, nibbling hay.

Three days later, Kitty was riding him.

"He's a swell colt, Pop," Kitty said, after their first ride. "He just seems to sail along. If anything gets in the road, he zoops right over it. I've named him Skip."

Pop Wade looked grave. "Reckon his owner won't be around to claim him. I found the hombre. Washed down the river against a beaver dam. Reckon he couldn't swim a lick."

The sparkle went out of Kitty's green eyes. "How terrible. Yet seeing those scars on that colt, I don't feel too bad about it. Not if he was the one who put 'em there."

"Hard to say. Complete stranger. No identification. Can't guess what brought him this way. Anyhow I put him under enough dirt to protect him from the buzzards."

To Sky-high, the Wade ranch was equal to a frisky colt's paradise. He was assigned to a corral which contained several older cowhorses. They were all friendly souls. Through the rails of the corral fence, Sky-high always watched for Kitty. He enjoyed the long rides with the girl in the saddle. He had never known a friend like Kitty.

The spring furnishing the house water supply gushed from a rock crevice beside the corral corner. One day Sky-high watched Kitty dip a pail of water from the spring. For the first time he jumped the corral fence. When she returned to the cabin, he followed like a dog.

At the doorstep the girl turned and pointed to the corral. Understanding, Sky-high trotted back to the spring and hopped into the enclosure. This procedure became customary, and the girl did not censure him.

One lazy afternoon a horse and rider came loping down the river trail. Sky-high was following Kitty near the cabin. He stared at the oncoming horseman. A quick wave of alarm chilled him. He recognized that thick-set man astride the bay horse.

With a snort he wheeled and trotted to the corral, leaping easily over the high rail fence. He retreated to a far corner and stood motionless with ears flattened back, watching Bard Buksul dismount beside the girl.

The man's eyes, bold and black, roved over Kitty Wade. "You're getting plumb growed up, blondy. Prettier every time I ride this way."

"What do you want, Mr. Buksul?" Kitty asked coldly.

"Come looking for the horse I loaned Sid Tweedie. See you're keepin' him." Buksul jerked a blunt thumb toward the corral.

Dismay clouded Kitty's face. "Does that black colt belong to you?"

"Sure does, miss. Bought him a month ago from the Flat C."

"Oh." Kitty's voice seemed to stall in her throat.

POP WADE came riding up and dismounted. He eyed Buksul quizzically. The big man explained about loaning Sky-high to Tweedie.

"Tweedie drowned," Wade said. "I found him later and buried him on the river bank."

"Was Tweedie all you found?" Buksul asked pointedly.

Wade looked puzzled. "That's all."

Bard Buksul grunted, scratched his stomach. "Damned funny, Wade. Sid Tweedie was toting ten thousand dollars he hooked from the Fur Lodge bank. I saw it."

Although Pop Wade was unarmed, the pleasant lines fled from his face. "Are you inferring I beefed Tweedie and stole that bank swag, Buksul!"

Bard Buksul's face split into a greasy grin. "Keep your shirt on, Wade. I didn't say that. Only I recall Tweedie had the cash in a waterproof oilskin sack. There was enough hard money to send it straight to the river bottom. If you didn't find it, the dinero must still be in the water."

"Sounds reasonable," Wade agreed.

"The water is extry clear right now. You know where Tweedie fell in?"

Wade nooded. "We'll go look. Short ways. We can hoof it."

The men crossed on a log bridge and strode up the ledge trail to a point above the deep pool. The water was so transparent that each pebble on the bottom seemed almost within reach of the surface.

Buksul suddenly poked a finger downward. "Looks like the bag!" he barked excitedly.

"It's a sack of some kind resting on the bottom."

"We got to cut a long pole. Put a hook on it. Must be twenty foot to the water. And that hole is another twenty foot deep."

"Easier way than that, Buksul. I'll go get Kitty. She'll dive for it. She can swim like a fish—underwater."

Buksul remained on the trail while Wade summoned Kitty. The girl appeared in a home-made bathing suit that fitted her young figure like a glove. She flushed slightly under the impact of Buksul's bold stare.

Wordless, she poised on the ledge, arrow-straight, and lifted her hands to form a point. With a flash of her sun-tanned legs, her body sliced the air. Down she rocketed, sliding into the water so smoothly as to cause only surface ripples.

She snatched the bag off the bottom her first pass. Struggling with the weight was not so easy, and she was nearly winded by the time she had towed it to the opposite shore.

When all three had returned to the cabin, Pop Wade dumped the contents of the bag onto an oak table. Money spilled out in a stream of silver and gold and green. "Looks like it's all here," he said.

Buksul fingered the money greedily. His gaze traveled to the girl. Her shapeliness was firmly outlined by the wet, clinging cloth. Buksul's eyes darkened to hot black pits. They swept back to the money, as if the man could not make up his mind which he wanted most.

Buksul licked his tobacco-caked lips. "Yeah, it's all here. Ten thousand."

Wade went on. "I reckon we should figure some way to return this stolen dinero to the Fur Lodge bank."

A scowl cut sharp lines in Bard Buksul's face. His right hand inched back toward the heavy pistol resting in his thigh holster.

"Those bankers are hog-rich without this stuff, Wade. They never would have found it. Finders are keepers. That's the way I figure. How about splittin' it fifty-fifty?"

Pop Wade noted the gun, the ruthless set of Buksul's jaw. Reluctantly, he shrugged.

BUKSUL divided the money, scooped his share into the sack and crammed it inside his shirt. "Get me my horse, Wade. I'll be on my way."

A quick cry escaped Kitty's lips. She pressed forward, her eyes appealing.

"Can't we buy Skippy, Pop? I want to keep him. Please."

Wade cleared his throat. "Buksul, you heard her. Will a hundred swing the deal?"

Buksul shook his head, a cunning glitter coming into his eyes as they feasted on the girl.

"Two hundred," Wade offered.

"The horse ain't for sale," Buksul said with finality. "But you can come along home with me and the colt, cutie. You're old enough to have a man of your own. I'll treat you plumb nice. With this dough I can buy you classy duds—anything you want. Come along, honey."

"No, thank you," Kitty said coldly.

Buksul shrugged. "Then get me the colt."

Kitty looked at Pop Wade in a way that made the old rancher's voice sad.

"You'll have to let him go, Kitty. He's Buksul's property."

Kitty ran from the room, her lips clenched tightly to halt their trembling.

When Bard Buksul tried to lead Sky-high away from the ranch by the halter rope, the black colt refused to budge. Buksul cursed roundly. Wade looked on without comment. Kitty was inside the cabin, her face pressed against a pillow.

Buksul snaked out his lariat, twirled the loop about Sky-high's neck. Jerking it tight, he half-hitched the saddlehorn and quirted his bay horse across the rump. The noose clamped tight about Sky-high's throat, blocking his wind.

"By thunder, you'll walk now or choke in your tracks!" Buksul fumed.

The hempen cord was like a steel trap on Sky-high's windpipe. The more savagely he fought it, the tighter it drew. He sucked in a thin wisp of air, could not exhale it.

Fire filled his lungs. His brain whirled. The setting sun's crimson dimmed to spinning black.

FINALLY the instinct of self-preservation overpowered Sky-high's hate and fear of Bard Buksul. He yielded grudgingly. The lariat loop slackened as he moved forward. Air funneled into his lungs in wheezing gasps.

Buksul shook the lariat loose, pounded his bay into a trot. Sky-high moved along behind, his heart heavy at leaving Kitty and the ranch that had come to be his home.

Heavy shadows gloomed the canyon. Night was near. Yet as soon as the mountain wall blotted the ranch buildings from sight, Buksul slowed the horses to a walk. They dawdled along the trail for a short distance, then halted beside a dense thicket of baby jackpine.

Buksul sat his saddle for a while, looking backtrail and chewing his tobacco cud. Nothing happened. Finally the man steered his bay through the small trees, dragging Sky-high behind. He dismounted between two thin sugar pines. He secured the bay to one tree and tied Sky-high's halter rope to the other trunk.

As he checked his pistol loads, he muttered under his breath, "Wonder if old man Wade is loco enough to believe I'd let him hang onto that five thousand."

Snickering, Buksul strode away into the shadows.

When Buksul was out of sight, Sky-high tested the rope with a sharp jerk of his head. It held. Bunching his muscles, he reared back solidly. Although the rope was old and frayed and half rotten, still it did not give. Time after time, Sky-high slammed his weight backward. The rope merely twanged taut.

Recalling the terrible burn of Bard Buksul's blacksnake, Sky-high tried grinding the hemp between his front teeth. When that failed, he went up on his hind legs and slashed a sharp forehoof against the fetter.

A strand parted. Sky-high fought like a wild stallion. Biting and slashing, he shredded another strand. As he slammed back full force, the weakened rope snapped near the knot.

His powerful drive piled him on his haunches. He skidded in the pine needles, rolled over. He scrambled to his feet, unhurt except for a sore neck.

Plodding silently in the trail dust, wary as an elk now, Sky-high skulked back to the Wade ranch. He detoured the cleared area about the buildings. Circling through the brush, he came to the back fence of the horse corral.

The spring in his legs sent him over the top rail with a foot to spare. He landed softly in the deep dust.

From inside the corral, Sky-high watched the silent house. Lamplight painted the window shades. Smoke twisted from the stone chimney.

Abruptly the back door opened, and Kitty Wade came out with a pail. Dejectedly, she moved toward the spring.

Sky-high's ears flicked forward. He quietly walked to the fence beside the spring and waited. His black coat blended with the darkness, and Kitty did not notice him.

As the girl bent over to fill the pail, a burly figure suddenly plunged out of a manzanita tangle and seized her.

Sky-high snorted in alarm. He saw that the man was Bard Buksul. His ears flattened and he pranced in the dust.

THE pail dropped in the water as Buksul clamped the girl against his thick chest. One hand pressed tightly over her mouth, Buksul staggered back. He cursed as her heels hammered his shins.

As he tried to pin down her feet, she wriggled loose an arm and jabbed a sharp elbow into his paunch. Fighting like a wildcat, she tore at his face savagely.

Cursing, Buksul tried to slam her to the ground. Kicking and clawing, she eeled away. She might have eluded him had not her blond pigtails betrayed her.

Buksul caught one of the braids, yanked her head back. She screamed. Buksul's balled fist collided with her chin, clipping off her outcry. She dropped limply to the ground.

At Pop Wade's yell of alarm, Buksul dived into the manzanita. Flattened on the ground, he was practically invisible.

The door banged open. Pop Wade came rushing out, a carbine half raised to his shoulder. His white hair gleamed in the lamplight that spilled from the room.

"Kitty! Where are you? What happened?"

Sky-high whinnied. His hoofs cut up the corral dirt in agitation. If only he could help.

Kitty was stretched on the ground, motionless and limp and pale. Bard Buksul was coiled like a snake in the verdure, his six-gun lined on Pop Wade, waiting for the old rancher to come close enough for a shot that could not miss. Buksul's attention was glued so firmly on the approaching ranchman that he did not even glance at the horse in the corral.

Pop Wade came nearer, straining his eyes in the darkness, calling to Kitty with fear mushrooming in his voice.

Desperation goaded Sky-high. He did not understand everything that was transpiring. But he knew Kitty was hurt. And he knew Bard Buksul was crouched there in the bushes.

All of the hatred Buksul had provoked within Sky-high was boiling up within him, forging into a driving force. The supple dynamo of strength in his legs abruptly powered him high in the air. He sailed over the top rail and plummeted down toward the manzanita, his fore-legs stiff as ramrods.

Bard Buksul's neck twisted, and he saw the horse booming down upon him. He uttered a squall of frenzied fear. Too late he tried to roll aside. Two hoofs stabbed deep into the small of his back, smashing him to the ground like thunderbolts.

Buksul howled in pain. The gun in his hand belched red fire. The bullet thudded harmlessly into the earth.

Frightened by the shot, Sky-high reared high and came down hard. One forehoof crunched on Buksul's thick neck. Bone snapped. The man's wail deepened into a groan. He slumped grotesquely on the ground. Sky-high pranced away, snorting, his nostrils full of gun-smoke.

Pop Wade ran up with leveled carbine. He lit a match, examining Buksul.

"Killed by a horse," he muttered, "while aiming at me. What a horse!"

The next minute, Wade was reviving Kitty with spring water. She sat up, undaunted, and listened as Wade talked.

Sky-high ventured near enough to rub his nose gently on her arm.

Kitty reached up and patted his silky neck. "No one will ever take you away from us again," she said softly. "You can jump all the fences you want."

Sky-high was home. And he was happy.

Just before he was killed, Tate Lambert had written a name in the dust!

The Horsehair Noose

by LESLIE ERNENWEIN

THERE was no sign of impending trouble on Main Street when Sheriff Sam Odegarde stepped out of his office at the courthouse and propelled his saddle-warped boots toward the Alhambra Saloon. But because the old lawman knew a bloody feud was brewing in the Fandango Hills, his leathery, lantern-jawed face held a worried frown. The threat of range war was bad medicine for a sheriff at any time. Right before election it was enough to plague a man's mind and spoil his vittles.

Squinting across the sun-hammered street, Sheriff Odegarde glanced at the Mansion House Hotel where Doc Plunkett, otherwise known as "Parable" Plunkett, dozed in his favorite chair. Besides being Broken Bow's only medico, Plunkett was the town's Number One spellbinder. Having more education than five circuit-riding gospel slingers and a whisky drum-

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mer combined, Doc could spout two-bit words of wisdom from here to who hid the broom.

Like now, when Sheriff Sam called:

"First drink time, Doc."

Plunkett reared up so sudden that his battered stovepipe hat slid down across his bush-browed eyes. When he pushed it back to its usual cocky angle he peered at the clock in the courthouse belfry and exclaimed:

"Time, time—the limiting measurement of witless fools filled with fury against the inevitable disintegration of their own worthless bodies!"

"Ain't it so," Odegarde agreed tolerantly. "You going to wet your whistle, Doc?"

Parable Plunkett adjusted the black string tie which encircled a wing collar, then mopped his jowly, age-mottled face with a monogrammed handkerchief.

"Well now," he mused, as if giving the matter careful consideration, "it sounds like a worthy suggestion, Sam. Perhaps I shall."

Odegarde grinned and waited, knowing that Doc hadn't missed a drink at this hour since Shad Pratt's wife had triplets out on Crazy Woman Creek four years ago. And even then old Parable had toted a bottle along with him.

Plunkett plodded to the hotel lobby and called in to the proprietor:

"If any of my many friends and admirers inquire for me I'm at the Alhambra."

NEXT, walking with the careful dignity of a man seldom sober, he joined Sheriff Sam and accompanied him toward the saloon. As they passed the Dragoon Basin Bank, Clark Morgan came to the doorway.

"Any news from the high country, sheriff?" he asked.

Sam Odegarde had never liked this arrogant, big-bodied money grabber. And since Morgan had talked Joe Rondeen into running against him for sheriff in the coming election, Odegarde disliked the banker more than ever.

But Sam's tone was civil when he addressed him.

"Nary a word, which is good news I reckon."

A smirking smile creased Morgan's spongy face. "Perhaps your son-in-law and his cowmen friends are waiting until after election to start their rumpus, as a personal favor to you," he suggested and turned back into his bank.

"There," Doc Plunkett observed, "is the uncrowned king who will one day control Dragoon Basin from end to end and all between."

Sheriff Sam snorted.

"King, my eye! He's just a would-be politician with a bank and a weekly newspaper. It'll take more than that to elect Joe Rondeen."

"Rogues have risen to power on less," Doc declared. "The power of the press is second only to the power of gold. And Morgan has both."

"Folks around here won't give him no never mind, regardless," Odegarde said stubbornly. "Not even the sheepmen in Sangree Canyon."

Just before they reached the Alhambra's batwing gates, the sheriff glanced at a plume of dust out on the flats west of town.

"That galoot coming yonderly," he observed, "must be packing a considerable thirst at the rate he's riding."

They went inside and Shaemus O'Shea reached for the bottle of bourbon he kept below the bar.

"Begun to think ye spalpeens wasn't comin'," he greeted and filled two glasses brimming full.

Sheriff Sam took his drink at a gulp and followed it with a fresh chaw of tobacco as insurance against taking another drink, but Doc Plunkett sipped his bourbon like it was wine of rare vintage.

"Nectar of the gods," he said smilingly and smacked his lips.

Presently, the talk turned to the trouble brewing in the hills.

"Pride and honesty," Plunkett declared, "don't go well together. They make a mismatched team for a man to drive."

"What," O'Toole demanded, "has pride to do with it, Doc?"

Shaemus wore a wet bandana on his bald head during the heat of the day, and a foolish grin on his Irish face all the time. But he wasn't as thick as he looked, which was a good thing—considering what happened later on.

Plunkett took time out for another sip of whisky, and Sheriff Sam puckered up his lips for a squirt at a green-bellied horse fly that was rimming the big brass cuspidor. Sam plastered the fly first shot, then shifted his chaw to the opposite cheek.

"Yeah," he said, "what has pride and honesty got to do with Tate Lambert feuding with every outfit in the hills?"

"It's very simple," Doc Plunkett explained pompously. "In fact it's elemental. Tate's pride made him resent the success of his more industrious neighbors whose cattle were crowding the range he pioneered. Yet an inherent honesty kept him from resorting to the same tactics which at least one neighbor was using against him—namely the dishonest application of a hot iron to the hides of stray calves.

"So Lambert builds a toll-gate at Pyramid Pass and proceeds to charge a dollar a head for every steer, horse or human that goes through it. When the other cowmen tried to buy him out, they couldn't borrow the money from the bank. Now Lambert has to fight—or starve."

"This country would be better off if the cranky old coot up and died of starvation," O'Shea suggested.

Which was when young Billy Peel barged through the batwings with a bug-eyed look in his eyes.

"Tate Lambert has been shot!" he yelled.

All the way to Pyramid Pass Sheriff Sam Odegarde kept glancing back, hoping that Doc Plunkett's buggy wouldn't be too far behind. A shooting like this was bad enough, but if Tate Lambert should die before medical aid reached him, there'd be the devil to pay. Remembering what the Peel boy had told him, Odegarde spurred his bronc to a faster pace.

Billy, who'd been crossing the almost impassable crest of Pyramid Divide above the Pass, had heard one shot and the sound of a running horse a moment before he glimpsed Lambert writhing on the ground. Unable to descend the sheer walls of the Pass at this point, the boy had ridden hell-for-leather into town.

When Sheriff Sam topped the last switchback and started through the slot of the Pass, Doc Plunkett's buggy was less than a mile behind. The old medico, Odegarde reflected, was a driving fool when the occasion called for it. And an expert with gunshot wounds, drunk or sober. If there was any chance to save Tate Lambert the Doc could do it.

But even if Lambert lived, this deal was going to cause plenty of trouble. It would give the sheepmen on the east side of Dragoon Basin something to gloat about. They'd always called the Fandango Hills men a bunch of outlaws ever since the cowmen had set up an arbitrary deadline against sheep and backed it with bullets.

DISMOUNTING at the big gate, Sheriff Sam climbed over it and glimpsing Lambert's sprawled form, loosed a sighing curse. He'd seen too many dead men to have any doubts about this one. Tate Lambert was deader than last year's beef drive!

Kneeling beside the body, Odegarde glanced at the pool of congealed blood in the dust below Lambert's stained shirt.

"Spleen shot," he muttered and felt a sudden sense of pity for this cantankerous oldster who'd died in writhing agony. Lambert, he saw, hadn't even been armed, which showed he wasn't expecting trouble. Then, as Sheriff Sam's eyes started probing for sign, he saw something that made him curse again. He was still staring at it when Doc Plunkett came rushing up to him.

"So it's a corpse for the coroner," Doc muttered. "Well, I'm the coroner."

Which was when he saw what Sheriff Sam was looking at.

"A message from the dead!" he blurted.

Odegarde nodded.

"I can't believe it," he said softly and continued to stare at the four letters written in the dust close to Lambert's death-stiffened fingers. Four scrawling letters that looked like R-a-n-d—the name of Sheriff Sam's son-in-law!

The letter "d" had a dangling tail on it, mute evidence that death had ended Tate Lambert's last frantic effort to testify against his murderer. That tragic writing had shocked Sheriff Sam into a welter of conflicting emotions, for Jim Rand was like a son to him. The young cowman had married Faith Odegarde a little over a year ago and was the father of a two-months'-old boy named Sam, after his proud grandfather.

Odegarde's first impulse upon seeing those four incriminating symbols had been to brush them out of existence with one sweep of his hand. But the silver star on his vest had somehow held him back and he'd known then that fifteen years of honest badge-toting had built a barrier he couldn't break down. Not even for his own kinfolk.

There was a smudge of dust on the first finger of Lambert's right hand. Sheriff Sam was looking at that when he noticed what looked to be two pieces of thread snagged in a claw of the cameo ring on the dead man's little finger. Pulling them loose he discovered that they were strands of horsehair.

"Shot at such close quarters the powder burned his shirt," Doc Plunkett announced, examining the wound.

"Must've been standing with his hand on the bronc's mane when it happened," Odegarde said, reconstructing the scene from force of long habit. "When he fell, his ring snagged these two hairs."

Then, examining the strands closer, he saw that they were of two different colors. One was jet black and the other was reddish sorrel. Which was uncommonly strange. In a lifetime around horses he'd never seen those two combinations of colors in a bronc's mane.

Parable Plunkett got up and gestured toward the letters in the dust.

"You could've scuffed them out before I got here," he said.

"Almost did," Odegarde admitted.

Plunkett sighed. "As I said in the saloon—pride and honesty don't go well together, Sam. You going to arrest Jimmy Rand?" he asked.

Odegarde cuffed back his sweat-stained Stetson.

"What the blazes else can I do?" he demanded angrily.

"The mills of the gods grind slowly," Parable Plunkett suggested. "Why don't you do the same?"

Methodically, like a man doing a chore he dreads but most do, Sheriff Sam followed the killer's trail from Pyramid Pass. Twice he lost the sign on the broad rock outcrop along the west shoulder of the divide, but by resorting to patiently ridden circles he picked up the trail each time. And during this period of slow riding he asked himself how Jimmy Rand could commit so brutal a crime.

HIS son-in-law, like the other cowmen in the Fandango Hills, had resented Lambert's toll-gate and tried to convince the old crank that he shouldn't make them all suffer because one night-riding sneak was stealing him blind. But Jimmy wasn't the type to shoot an unarmed man low. At least he'd never seemed to be.

Odegarde put his mind to listing the men he might have suspected if he hadn't seen those four letters in the dust. Bart Trebo would've been first, because he'd had a record in New Mexico before coming to Arizona. Then there was Jud Peel, who'd tried to organize the cowmen into armed resistance against Lambert's toll-gate. The other four—Gus Ledbetter, Joe Rondeen, Shad Smith and Matt Gregory—all lived far enough south so that the roundabout route to town through Brimstone Canyon wasn't quite so great a hardship. But even for them it would mean driving their beef steers across a wide and waterless strip of desert to reach town.

Dropping into the narrow valley where Concho Creek ran a crooked course be-

tween twin rows of cottonwoods, Odegarde followed the tracks into the water and lost them again. Jim Rand's place lay almost due west of here, up in the tumbled hills. Sheriff Sam could've ridden to it with his eyes shut, but because he dreaded reaching it, he stubbornly searched for sign along the west bank of the creek.

And remembering Parable Plunkett's advice, he muttered:

"The mills of the gods grind slowly."

But no matter how slow he traveled, Sheriff Sam knew where the trail would wind up eventually; and cursing the thought of it, tried to banish the tragic pictures that kept forming in his mind—pictures of a fatherless baby boy and his widowed mother and Jim Rand's lifeless body turning slowly at the end of a rope. For the verdict would be "guilty of murder" and the sentence would be death. No court in Cattleland would stand for killing an unarmed old man.

Sheriff Sam scowlingly scouted the creek a mile north, then retracting his course, rode almost two miles south before he found the tracks he was searching for. Yet even then, guessing where they'd lead him, he felt no satisfaction in finding them.

Later a frugal sense of relief came to him, for the tracks were definitely headed south toward Brimstone Canyon. That, he guessed, meant that Jim Rand was taking the roundabout way to town. It would make the dismal chore of arresting him a trifle easier. At least Faith and young Sam wouldn't be watching.

It was sundown when Odegarde rode through Brimstone Canyon with the tracks plainly visible ahead of him. At dusk, out on the sandy flats of Apache Desert, he took his last look at the sign and then headed for town. No need for further trailing; Jim Rand would be in Broken Bow by now.

Later, Sheriff Odegarde dismounted at Mulqueen's Stable and turned his tired bronc over to the liveryman.

"Is Jim Rand in town, Dude?" he asked warily.

"He was," Mulqueen reported. "Him and darn near everybody else. The news of Lambert's murder spread fast and they rode in to hear who done it. But most of 'em has gone home now."

"Jim left?" Odegarde asked, hoping he hadn't, yet dreading the ordeal his presence here would bring.

Mulqueen nodded. "Upward of an hour ago. You find any clues, Sam?"

"Some," Odegarde admitted and walked wearily to the Alhambra Saloon.

Parable Plunkett stood propped at the bar in the fashion of a man not quite drunk and not quite sober.

"Did you return to our fair metropolis alone and unencumbered?" he asked eagerly, as Odegarde eased through the batwings.

Sheriff Sam nodded, whereupon Plunkett smiled and said:

"Come calm your conscience with nectar of the gods and fill your ears with our gladsome tidings."

O'Shea poured a generous drink.

"Shaemus," Doc declared, "has accomplished a brilliant stroke of scientific deduction. He has revealed a motive for Lambert's murder."

"So," Odegarde muttered disinterestedly.

"Only one man could have profited by Lambert's death," O'Shea announced. "The same man who tried to buy him out a week ago, begorrah!"

ODEGARDE downed his drink and from force of habit took out his plug of tobacco. But instead of taking a chaw, he held out his glass. A man needed more than one drink to kill the misery that was like a nest of rattlesnakes inside him.

"Who?" he inquired.

"Clark Morgan!" Doc reported. "Old Tate told Shaemus a week ago that Morgan offered him three hundred dollars more than the cowmen and he turned Clark down."

That was a surprise.

"What in tarnation would Morgan want with Lambert's sorry outfit?" he demanded.

"To blockade the Fandago Hills bunch into bankruptcy," said Plunkett. "To do what Lambert was doing—only worse. Instead of charging one dollar a head, Morgan would probably charge two or even three. He'd have that whole range in the palm of his hand!"

It would be a motive, Odegarde reflected, except for those four letters in the dust. But that scrawled writing made all his palaver just so much whisky talk.

"I suppose you'll tell me next that Morgan rode out there, tried to talk Tate into selling and shot him in a fit of anger," Odegarde scoffed. "Then Morgan rode back so fast he beat young Billy Peel into town."

Doc Plunkett shook his head.

"Morgan would have hired it done," he explained patiently. "And there's only one man he'd trust with that kind of a job."

"Joe Rondeen!" O'Shea blurted.

And Parable Plunkett smiled triumphantly.

But Odegarde didn't smile. He picked up his drink and was gulping it down when Doc wet his finger with whisky and wrote "R-o-n-d" on the bar. Then, as the medico's finger made a tail on the "d", Sam Odegarde choked on good bourbon!

"Tate Lambert always was a poor writer," Plunkett said. "That bullet in his paunch didn't improve his penmanship—and it killed him before he could finish the name he was trying to write!"

For a full moment as he gasped for breath and finally got the whisky down, Shriff Odegarde stood speechless.

"Did Rondeen ride into town this afternoon—from the south?" he asked.

"Don't know which direction he came from," O'Shea said. "But he sure as Christmas rode in. He's over at the newspaper office right now, helpin' Clark Morgan compose an editorial for the weekly edition which comes out tomorrow. Him and Clark been telling it around town that we need a new sheriff to stop all this killing and rustling that's been going on."

Sheriff Sam grinned from ear to ear.

"Rondeen will read that paper in jail unless I miss my guess," he exclaimed jubilantly and turned toward the doorway.

"Maybe so he'll turn state's evidence on Morgan between now and hanging day."

"Don't be in such a confounded rush!" Plunkett suggested. "Wait until we devise an iron-clad means of convicting our culprit—some concrete evidence we can show in court."

Odegarde reached into his shirt pocket.

"I've got the evidence," he declared. "I trailed the killer's horse from the scene of the crime all the way to Apache Desert."

"But you can't show horse tracks in court, no more than you can show writing in the dust," Plunkett objected. "Remember what I said about the mills."

"Yeah—I know," Odegarde said, and held the two horsehairs in his fingers. "They grind slow and exceeding fine. Which is how I'm going to hang the deadwood on Rondeen — darned exceeding fine!"

WHEREUPON he hurried down the street to Mulqueen's Livery.

"Where's Joe Rondeen's bronc, Dude?" he asked shortly.

The liveryman took him to the animal's stall and held a lantern for Odegarde's inspection. Which was when the grin faded from Sheriff Sam's face. The sweat-stained bronc was a golden palomino with a silver mane and tail.

The old lawman gazed dully at the mismatched strands in his hand and knew beyond shadow of doubt that they hadn't come from this animal's mane. His shoulders slumped. The man who'd killed Tate Lambert hadn't changed horses from the time he left Pyramid Pass. Maybe the first guess had been correct after all. Perhaps those symbols in the dust were R-a-n-d.

"You sure this is Rondeen's horse?" he asked soberly.

"Sure I'm sure," Dude told him. "He's wearing Joe's brand, and that's his gear hanging there on the hook."

Then, as Dude flashed the lantern at Rondeen's saddle gear, Sheriff Sam's eyes tightened.

"Will you swear to that in court?"

"Sure," Mulqueen said. "But what the tarnation for, Sam?"

"To convict a smelling gun-shooting murderer!" Odegarde declared and absently polished the star on his vest as he hurried toward the lamplit doorway of Morgan's newspaper office.

Fifteen minutes later Sheriff Sam stood at the Alhambra bar again with Plunkett and O'Shea.

"Rondeen felt real cocky when I first locked him up," Odegarde reported. "But he cooled down considerable just before I left. Shouldn't wonder if he's in a talking mood by morning."

"What cooled the culprit down?" Plunkett inquired.

Sheriff Sam held up the strands of hair.

"Showed him these, and told him where they came from. He knew then they were the same as a horsehair noose around his neck."

"Where did they come from?"

"From a claw of the ring on Tate Lambert's finger," Plunkett said pompously and slapped Odegarde on the back. "I'd forgotten all about it," he admitted. "Good thing you checked them with the mane of Rondeen's bronc."

"They didn't match with the bronc's mane at all," Odegarde said and grinned at Plunkett's bug-eyed expression.

"Then what good are they as evidence?" the medico demanded.

"Mebbe they ain't horsehairs at all," O'Shea voluntered. "Mebbe they come from Rondeen's head—when Lambert made a grab at him!"

"But Rondeen's bald," Parable Plunkett muttered morosely. "You sure they don't match the mane of his bronc, Sam?"

Odegarde nodded knowingly. "Perhaps they will by daylight," Doc offered.

"Nope, but they match something a danged sight better. The only horsehair saddle pad in Dragoon Basin. And Joe Rondeen owns it!"

Whereupon Sheriff Sam did something he hadn't done for a long, long time. He downed his fourth drink of bourbon in one day. • • •

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BUFFALO MEN

CHAPTER I

The Speeding Bullet

THERE ain't no buffalo left, south of the Arkansaw."

The speaker, "Buckskin" Joe, who had trapped with Carson and Bridger, spoke with authority and the listeners were respectful.

"Railroad's got as far as Dodge City. Goin' further. The steel trail has wiped out the buffalo paths, one way and another. Whites has killed more of 'em than redskins, to my mind. Injuns kill 'em for meat, so did the railroads and the army. Now we're killin' 'em for their hides. Purty soon we'll be pickin' up bones for glue. And what's left, we can't get at lawful."

"How come you-all figger that, Joe?"

"I'll tell you. What buffalo is left is all on the Staked Plains, the *Llanos Estacados,* down between the Arkansaw and the Rio Grande. They're thick as flies. This is inside information. Once let these tallermen and buyers get wind of it, and they'll send in hunters and skinners enough to stampede the herd plumb into Mexico. Now here's the proposition—"

They gathered closer, buffalo men all of them. They knew Buckskin Joe did not speak at random. Len Filer, his sister's son, edged in. He was proud of his uncle, proud of the fact that Buckskin Joe had taken him under his wing and taught him all, or nearly all, he knew of hunting and trapping.

Len's chin and upper lip showed a faint yellow down that matched his hair. Most of the others were heavily bearded. To them, he was just a stripling.

"Myers says he'll build a tradin' store on 'Dobe Walls Creek, where it runs into Bent's Creek, which is the south fork of the Cimarron. Bent had a station there, thirty years ago. Kit Carson and Bridger was in with him, but they had to give it up, and there's nothin' left but the unroofed 'dobe.

"In 'Sixty-five they sent Kit to round up the Injuns who figgered they'd take advantage of the Civil War and kill off all the whites. The tribes had a powwow.

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a novelet by **J. ALLAN DUNN**

When Len Filer lined his sights on the Comanche war chief, victory or defeat depended on a single shot

An arrow carried Len's sombrero away

Cheyennes, Arapahos, Kiowas, Kaws and Comanches made a truce for the purpose. That's ancient history, mebbe, to a lot of you. I want to get this thing straight."

"Go on," said a tall Texan.

"So Kit chases the redskins plumb to 'Dobe Walls. Fought 'em eight hours, a hundred and fifty lodges. Killed sixty and chased the rest back to the hills without a chance to carry off their dead. I've seen the bones of them sixty, scattered by coyotes, bleachin' outside them walls. You can find 'em yet."

"What of it?"

BUCKSKIN JOE looked at the speaker pityingly.

"Maybe you don't *sabe* them redskins ain't goin' to forget them unburied bones. The Medicine Lodge Treaty come next, in 'Sixty-seven. It give the tribes the buffalo right where they are now, though it wasn't figgered then they would all gather there. A troop of cavalry is set on patrol to keep the peace and see all buffalo hunters stay north of the Arkansaw. That treaty still stands."

The tall Texan, whose name was Hull, broke in with his drawl, his slow speech convincing.

"Texas ain't a republic no mo', but it's part of the Union. What right have the redskins to hog all the buffalo because they happen to drift there? The Injuns ain't kept *their* end of the treaty. They're raidin', skelpin', lootin' killin', and raisin' general hell. The patrol's a joke. What's one troop? A soldier has one horse, an Injun has a dozen, and he'll ride 'em to death and have a dozen mo'. One troop of cavalry can't hold 'em.

"Quanah Parker, head chief of the Comanches, is on the war-path, or next to it, makin' war talk with the Kiowas and Comanches."

"I'm comin' to that," said Buckskin Joe. "Hell, that's my point! I want you to see all the risks. Myers, with his tradin' store, will pay us hunters to freight his goods in our wagons, sell us goods at Dodge City prices, buy and trade all the hides we fetch in. He's square, and that's more than you can say for a lot of traders. Rath and Wright, both good men, will build another store. There's room for two. O'Keefe says he'll start a smithy. Jim Hanrahan will run an eatin' house. But—the cavalry might interfere. A settlement like that is a good talkin' point for Quanah to raise hell. On the other hand, there's a lot of money for a few of us who's in the know, if we're willin' to run the risks. Hull's right in one thing. When they made the treaty they couldn't tell the buffalo would crowd on the Staked Plains. That's all. Make up your minds."

"How about you, Joe?"

"Me? I'm for it. Me and my nevvy here, and our skinners, we'd go anyways, only it's too far to haul hides to Dodge City. But if you want to organize, with Myers, Rath and Hanrahan, I'll be along. Just wanted to make it plain we're like to have to shoot more Injuns than buffalo, if we tackle it."

"Wouldn't the Injuns keep peaceful for the sake of tradin' at the stores? Ain't there talk of a Government beef issue?" asked one of the hunters.

"They don't want beef. They believe the buffalo was give 'em by Manitou. They're feared of bein' herded on reservations. They don't bank strong on government promises, and you can't blame 'em. They'd rather fight. Reckon we would, in their place."

Len Filer wondered a little at that last sentence. But he knew his uncle, Buckskin Joe, had always believed the redskins and the whites could get along, if the redskins were treated properly, not lied to, cheated, made mad with trading whisky. But the Manitou-given buffalo were another thing. It would be risky to set up a trading post at 'Dobe Walls, to kill off the buffalo herds.

His blood tingled at the thought. This might be death, but it was life while it lasted.

The hunters were a hard, wild crowd, wilderness men. Their outfits usually consisted of one or more hunters, two skinners to each hunter, and a cook. They

would drive out into the Staked Plains, make their stands, generally far apart, practically defenseless if attacked in force. All of them had traded lead for steel, and for more lead from the Indians who owned rifles. There were few who were not scarred. One of them had been scalped.

And they were all of one mind about the plan. Their swarthy, bronze, lined faced showed their enthusiasm, and Len kindled to their shout. It was a unanimous vote. Buckskin Joe was appointed their spokesman to tell the traders, the restaurant keeper and the blacksmith to start as soon as possible, within two or three days. They were to get started before word could get out of the buffalo's last feeding grounds, south of the Arkansaw.

THEY had gathered on the outskirts of Dodge City, and the question being settled, they started horseplay, like so many schoolboys, save that whisky appeared, boasts were made, wrestling-matches organized. Then shooting at targets.

The hunters owned the heavy, single-shot, .50 caliber Sharps that would bring down a buffalo bull with one bullet. The recoil was so heavy that most of the time they shot from rests of crotched sticks. There was not a poor shot among them. A man who wasted lead and scattered a bunch of buffalo could not make a living.

Bat Masterson was easily the master of any of them in handling a six-gun, probably unmatched by anybody but Wild Bill Hickok. He did not meet much competition as he flipped his weapon from leather as fast as the eye could wink, with hammer back and falling even as it cleared the holster. He was fanning it, so that the cylinders emptied bullets in a stream that went straight to the target.

Buckskin Joe, aside from his buffalo gun, was a wizard with a pea-rifle. He won the prize nine times out of ten at any target and distance. These two were acknowledged tops. The question of the supremacy with the heavy Sharps was always an open one.

A hunter, named Kiowa Brett, won, regarding himself as the champion with a braggadocio that did not seem the right attitude to Len Filer. He had not taken part, not wanting to seem to push himself forward.

Kiowa was a breed, with a white father and a Kiowa mother. It was said that he also was a squaw man, but since women did not come into the lives of the buffalo men once they hit the hunting trail, that was seldom mentioned. Kiowa was a successful hunter, though he changed skinners pretty often. He was conceited and had a quick temper.

"I'll shoot anyone in the crowd for anything they want to make it—and choose their own target," he said.

Having already proven himself the superior of those he now challenged, it looked to Len as if Kiowa was either trying to rub it in or wanted some easy money. He was astounded to hear Buckskin Joe answer him quietly.

"Taken for fifty dollars. Shootin' without rest."

Kiowa looked at Buckskin Joe in a surprise that was half a sneer, half assurance. Buckskin could handle the lighter pea-rifle but he was neither as young nor as strong as Kiowa, though still sturdy. Odds were against him when it came to the recoil of the heavy buffalo gun against his shoulder.

"I don't want to take your money, old man," said Kiowa.

"I ain't shootin' myself, Kiowa. I'm nominatin' my nevvy here, young Len Filer."

Len felt himself flush beneath the tan on his smooth skin as the crowd looked at him. Few knew much about him. He had not expected this. Pride thrilled him for his uncle's open faith. Buckskin Joe was more prodigal with criticism than praise, as a rule.

Kiowa looked contemptuously at him.

"I ain't takin' candy from kids, either," he said.

Buckskin grinned, hacked a nub of tobacco off with his Bowie knife, tucked the plug in his leathery cheek.

"You never was hot when it come to puttin' up any amount to speak of, Kiowa. I'll put it this away—Len here'll shoot, and if you can match him, I'll donate a double eagle to you personal. If you fail you can set up drinks for the crowd. Which I figger," he added with a second grin, "you was aimin' to do anyways out of your prize-money, bein' the big winner."

Kiowa scowled. He had no intention of buying drinks and he knew that Buckskin had deliberately tricked him into doing it, win or lose.

Buckskin turned to Len.

"You see that buzzard on the right hand top limb of the dead tree on the bluff. That's your target."

A MURMUR went round. They looked at the bluff, across the river. There were several dead cottonwoods and buzzards could always be found roosting there in the hot afternoon. There were others now in different trees from the one Buckskin pointed out with his gnarled forefinger. Even if Len made his target the rest would not fly away. It was too hard for them to launch themselves, and they were filled with scavenger food, too lazy to move.

But the buffalo men were estimating the distance. The bird looked no bigger than a crow.

"It's six hundred yards if it's a foot," said Hull.

"'Bout that," Buckskin allowed easily. "Calls for good reckoning, windage and drop, a good gun, a good eye an' an all-fired steady squeeze. Len, show 'em."

Old hunters shook their heads. Kiowa shrugged his shoulders. He knew that he would not put up a nickel on his own ability to make such a shot. There was a fair wind moving, the distance was unmeasured, sights had to be adjusted. It called for the perfection of marksmanship, if not the impossible and incredible.

Len's beaver cap had a visor. He drew it down over his eyes, sighted under it at an object he knew to be a hundred paces away, a tree on the near side of the river. He made a half-turn, keeping his own elevation exact, sighted across the river toward the bluff and the skeleton tree.

It was frontier surveying, used often to measure the width of a river, true as any surveyor's level. He fixed his sights. He figured the distance at about six hundred and twenty-five yards, but did not say anything.

He loaded with care, lifted the Sharps', sighting, his finger squeezing steadily to the last fraction of an ounce. Kiowa watching him, sneezed just as he thought the hammer about to fall. He was a fraction of a second too soon. Len put down his unfired rifle, rested his hands on top of the muzzle, looked at the breed.

Hull laid a heavy hand on Kiowa's shoulder.

"If you think you can't control your horn, just when the boy's squeezin', reckon you'd best take a pasear well away from heah, Kiowa. He might have shot and missed, it ain't goin' to do his aim no good liftin' that heavy rifle up and down without no rest. That was a breed trick, Kiowa. Don't repeat it."

Kiowa snarled like a coyote, but the vise of the Texan's grip was restraint on his brain as well as his body.

Len once more aimed, snugged cheek to stock, slowly, squeezed. The black, coarse-grained powder went off with a *boom*, a puff of white smoke and a jet of pale flame, out of which the bullet sped.

CHAPTER II

War!

WATCHING eyes saw the buzzard fall like a wet rag from the tree as Len stepped back on the recoil, sure he had scored.

He was embarrassed by the congratulations. He did not know that he was yet to bring off a shot at a far greater distance, at a far more notable target, a shot that would turn the tide of the bloodiest

battle in Indian history, and be talked of so long as any buffalo man was able to live and speak.

Even Kiowa's jealous, evil glance was a tribute. Len knew he had made an enemy out of the breed. The crowd broke up, four of them mounting him on their shoulders, bearing him to the nearest saloon. Others saw to it that Kiowa did not sneak off.

Hull gave the toast.

"Got to christen you on that shot," he said. "I ain't ever seen its equal. Heah's to you, 'Young Hawkeye.' "

Then and there Len almost lost the name of Filer. He was called Young Hawkeye from that day on.

Bat Masterson, before long to go down in frontier history as a famous law officer, added his words of praise.

"Keep on thataway, son, and you'll match Kit Carson. How about it, Buckskin? And if you ever want to come in my outfit, with your uncle's consent, all you got to do is say so."

"I'll keep him, Bat. As for Kit, I wouldn't say he'd ever even up with him. Carson *never* missed a shot, and that's a real record."

After two more rounds the men adjourned to make final arrangements for the trip to 'Dobe Walls.

* * * * *

On the southern border of the Staked Plains, Quanah, head chief of the Quahada Comanches, crafty and influential, stirred the assembling tribes. There were four hundred warriors of his own nation, Kiowas, Kaws, and affiliated Comanches. Envoys from the Cheyennes listened to the powwows, the speeches of the chiefs and the medicine men, the recount of ancient wrongs, prophecy of gloomy future unless they took action immediately.

Tales of old days, of battles, of victories and defeat. Two Bars, standing blind in the light of the fire, told of the bones left at 'Dobe Creek when the fierce Carson prevented them from carrying off their dead, a disgrace not longer to be borne.

Drums throbbed, braves leaped, hot blood surged into the lust for blood. The medicine men read signs in the flight of birds, the livers of sacrificed dogs. They went into trances and made predictions.

Quanah, a powerful figure, addressed the warriors.

"The hide hunters are killing off the bison on the Cimarron. They leave us without the meat given us by the Great Spirit. They have set up their lodges on the spot where the bones of our warriors lie unburied and unavenged.

"Shall we then starve? Bring your young men, and let us fall upon our foes. Meantime, I will send a messenger to their lodges. He will talk with one I know. They are on the land given us by the treaty that is not kept. It is the white man's word, a whisper on the wind. What is our word? Kill!"

It came from his throat like the call of a trumpet. A yell went up. That night there was a feast, a war dance. At dawn, the runners from the visiting tribes returned to their villages.

Within a week almost a thousand warriors gathered in the river bottoms. The priests chanted and the braves painted themselves, boasting of the deeds to come, examining their weapons. There were bows and arrows, scalping-knives, shields, the deadly lances of the Comanches, and guns taken in raids from wagon trains on the Santa Fé trail. Feathers were woven into the plaited manes and tails of the ponies.

Spies watched the inadequate cavalry patrol. Quanah remained quietly in his village. The medicine men, fierce-eyed, sleepless, pursued their consultations to determine the hour and day of the raid from favorable signs. Scouting parties went out, listening for the bark of buffalo guns, crawling upwind, seeking to surprise the widely scattered camps of the buffalo hunters.

QUANAH sent word to the military post asking for a conference, complaining of the presence of the hunters, setting a date for the first day of the new moon with Indian cunning. It was a day

two weeks off.

The wires hummed to Washington and there the senators and representatives read and listened to speeches, editorials and advice from men who had never been west of the Missouri, turned deaf ears to those who had, and to the advice of seasoned soldiers. Quanah must be maintained.

The veteran cavalry major visiting Quanah was told the young men were out hunting far and wide for sufficient meat, since the hunters had broken up the bison herds that had been promised the tribes. He saw no envoys, no strange lodges. Quanah gravely made him welcome, acknowledged the uselessness of fighting against the White Father, whose warriors were as the leaves on the tree. But the hunters at 'Dobe Walls had no right to be there.

That was true. Its existence was a source of friction. The major was not altogether fooled. But he could do nothing without orders, orders that would tell him not to provoke, to fire only in defense.

AN INDIAN commissioner was on the way to treat with them, he told Quanah and his chiefs.

Quanah knew he would not be there to greet the commissioner when the moon was new. Before then, there would be many new scalps on the medicine poles, his young men would be made strong. He would have taught the whites a lesson. They would have to treat with him as a victor, in a cause that was made just by the invasion of the hide hunters. The cavalry should have kept them away. But he did not press that point.

The prowess of Quanah would be multiplied, his name would be one to conjure with in the lodges of all the nations. He might well become the Great Chief of the united tribes. Even the fierce Apaches, the ancestral enemies of the Comanches, might join with him.

If they made terms with the white men at last, they would be terms Quanah would submit.

And he waited for the return of the messenger he had sent to 'Dobe Walls. His medicine men also waited. They had made up their minds, they had read the signs to suit their conjurations. Soon there would be blood to shroud the new moon—and it would be the blood of their enemies.

Quanah's messenger squatted on the ground, using his blanket for a rug. Opposite him, Joe took the same position, Bat Masterson, Hull and two other hunters standing by. Hull spoke occasionally in Comanche dialect and the warrior grunted monosyllables in reply. Buckskin was the official interpreter.

Len, standing well back, saw the Indian's eyes rest upon him for a long moment and wondered whether the brave had heard of the shot for which he had been dubbed Young Hawkeye, and felt ashamed of himself for his own presumption. But it was strange the brave should specially regard him.

The brave was alone in the midst of hostiles, but he showed no perturbation. His manner, his eyes, seemed as remote as those of an eagle, observing the buildings, the hunters and skinners, every detail of the place without betraying any more than a casual and half-contemptuous review.

He was taller than Len Filer, well muscled, deep-chested but his legs, those of a Plains Indian seldom afoot, were thin. His horse was a pale buckskin with white mane and tail, actually a palomino with one blue eye. The usual horsehair loop, that served as a rest for a warrior's arm as he shot beneath the neck of his galloping mount, was present. Red feathers were plaited into mane and tail.

The warrior's skin was the hue of newly minted bronze. He wore only a breechclout, and a red neckerchief covered his black hair, sign of a peaceful visit. He held an Army Springfield in the hollow of his arm. There was a knife in a sheath heavy with beading, as were his moccasins. More wagons came in, more men joined the powwow and the brave waited, serene, dignified, until these had assembled.

THEN he made a short speech, with brief, forceful gestures.

"Claims we got no right here, 'count of the treaty. He comes from Quanah, Quahada Comanche. Says Quanah don't want trouble, only his rights. But the buffalo are theirs. If we kill 'em, Quanah says he cannot hold his young men who need meat and have to hunt far to get it, now we've broken up the herds. That the way you get it, Hull?"

"What I caught. You're better at the lingo than I am. I'd say he's heah to spy us out, see how strong we are, and that a dern sight more hangs on *his* report when he gets back, than anything we'd tell him."

"Then why *let* him get back," asked a bearded hunter.

"Not lettin' him would be the sort of answer Quanah's looking for, to my mind," said Buckskin. "Quanah wants war, all right. But he wants it when he's ready, and he figgers things are in his favor. Now what do you want to say to him?"

There was a brief discussion while the brave's eyes were the only thing about him that moved.

"Tell him," said Masterson finally, "that they've broken the treaty themselves, broke it first, and plenty after that.

"Tell him we aim to stay, but we ain't lookin' for trouble no more than Quanah. But if it starts, we'll give a good account of ourselves until the Army comes. I reckon that's all, unless somebody's got somethin' else to offer."

There were no comments and Buckskin translated. The warrior listened gravely. Only once, there seemed something like a derisive smile on his proud lips when Buckskin spoke of the Army.

Then he took a clod of dirt, held it high in his right fist and crumbled it, with a swift flash in his eyes.

"That's war," said Bat Masterson.

The warrior's body rippled in muscular motion, the bronze statue came alive. He laid a hand on his pony's neck, vaulted, rifle in hand, to its back.

Man and beast seemed one as, centaur-like, they flowed over the ground. Forty rods away, he tore the red cloth off and shook his weapon in open defiance. Buckskin pressed down the rifle of a younger hunter.

"You got to respect a messenger, peace or war," he said. "Both sides need 'em, off and on. We'll have trouble on our hands soon enough. The big herd's here and we'll clean up while we can. But we got to be careful none of us get too far from the post."

June came. The bales of green hides piled up behind the two stores. At intervals they were taken to Dodge City. No cavalry came to bother them. They were all making money, the post was prosperous.

CHAPTER III

Attack!

FOR a time the hunters stayed in the post as they came in, sending back for their skinners. It was a busy time for the traders, the restaurant and bar, and the blacksmith. After a while the hunters tired of their foot races, wrestling, shooting and yarn spinning. They played cards, lifted weights with rough good humor and fellowship.

Not even Kiowa Brett disturbed that harmony. He was not seen at the trading post after the warrior left.

Len heard Buckskin discussing that with Hull and Masterson.

"He's a squawman," said Buckskin. "That means he'd have joined one of their lodges, one of the lower ones, but it would give him some standin'. He didn't rank high. He's a renegade but it's likely he'd rate higher with his people if he took 'em news about us. It's odds he spoke with the messenger, and you can bet he figgers we're goin' to be wiped out."

"You ain't advisin' us to light out, are you, Buckskin? This is our last big chance at the buffalo, and I'm still claim-

in' they're ours as much as any Injun's," said Masterson. "What's more, the Injuns massacre 'em. They'll drive a thousand over a bluff just to get the tongues and humps. That's the way they waste the meat Manitou give 'em."

Hull chuckled. "And we kill 'em just for their hides."

"We wouldn't if they was our beef supply. Buckskin, what do you say? Do we quit?"

Len watched his uncle hold up his head as if he was sniffing the air for scent of hostiles, while he combed his beard with his fingers.

"I'm uneasy," he said. "It's too dang quiet. There'll be a new moon soon. They like to start their deviltry in the dark of the moon, even though they don't like night-fightin'. If nothin' happens before the new moon, Quanah may have decided to let it slide, and you can figger that's because the other tribes ain't with him."

He shook his head, pondering.

"Nobody's seen sign of outside braves comin'," he said, "but then we've been stickin' close to the post and wouldn't. After all, the main herd is still around here. It might be a good thing if we was to organize a scoutin' party. Bat, you and Hull talk it over with the boys and let me know how they feel about it when me and Len get back from this shoot. I hate to quit before we have to. Just the same, I don't like the feel of things. I'll stick with the majority. We're gettin' rich but we got to be careful."

The great herd, by some vagary of the buffalo, stayed close, though split up under different leaderships of aggressive young bulls. They grazed along the rich bottom lands in the coulées and by the tributary creeks. The *llanos* in the north were more rolling than to the south and naturally separated the main body. The hunters cleaned up a band as they found it. The Indian style was to make a grand stampede in the mass and kill and kill in a wild frenzy until braves and ponies were played out.

The hunters chose a permanent camp where the cook stayed all the time. The shooting came first, then the skinners went to work in readiness for the wagon to haul the hides to the camp and peg them out for drying. The green hides reached the trading stores hard as board.

Buckskin Joe and Len made their camp on rising ground, about five miles south of the trading post. It was close to a small creek where there was good shade.

They found a buffalo herd the first morning. Buckskin and Len rode out together, keeping to the lower levels, working up wind. They staked out the horses in a coulée and left them to graze. Each had his forked gun-rest and they went bending low, crawling on hands and knees, sometimes wriggling snakewise on their bellies as they crossed the low ridges, trying not to make the grass wave too much and flush the ground birds and jackrabbits. Once, a black tail buck went bounding from a crest where it had been lying down.

IT WAS early, still a little hazy, with the sun sucking up the dew. The buffalo were better at scent than sight.

Then Len spotted them, looking in the mist like low clumps of moving trees, heavy heads low, nipping the grass down close to the roots. Willows in a marshy spot gave the two hunters cover, and they waited for the slow approach to get within range. Sometimes a humped beast looked up, chewing its cud peacefully. Len spotted the sentinel, a big bull. He would be the first to be downed.

The bulls were always picked first, shooting them back of where they could see the shoulders working under the shaggy hide.

The buffalo did not seem to mind the smell of blood. What counted was a succession of dead shots. As long as the fallen lay still the herd grazed on.

Buckskin kept sniffing the breeze and Len wondering why, asked him.

"I'm feared of smoke, Len. I've been wonderin' right along why them redskins ain't fired the plains. Might be because the grass ain't overly dry as yet, but I've

been expectin' them to try it. They'll want to drive the herd south for one thing, and hope to cut some of us off and even burn the post. And since they ain't tried it, I'm feared they're up to somethin' else. Meanin' war. It's five days yet to the new moon. I'll be glad to see it."

Again and again the Sharps boomed and then a cow swerved to nip a tempting tuft at the moment Len fired. He killed it but the shot missed the heart. The cow went to its knees, snorting before it rolled, kicking, bellowing, to finally collapse. The rest of the band gathered around it, sniffing, finally taking alarm, galloping away with their short tails stiff, tossing their big heads.

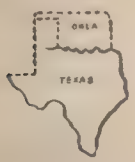
They had both been scalped.

The cook had been busy at the backboard of the wagon, which was his kitchen table. A shaft had gone sidewise through his throat, almost to the feathers. His skull had been split from the rear with a tomahawk, cleft once more in front. He was almost bald, and rage at being unable to take scalp for coup had caused that mutilation. The horses were dead, shot with arrows. Their throats had been cut, too.

Buckskin's seamed face looked old. These were his own men and he had failed to protect them. He had exposed them to death for the sake of extra hides, against his better judgment.

He spoke in a tense whisper to Len.

TEXAS PIONEER



CABEZA DE VACA—real name Alvar Nunez—was the first white man to set foot on the soil of Texas. Part of an expedition setting out to explore Florida, Nunez was shipwrecked and washed ashore near the spot where Galveston now stands, in the year 1528. His adventures fill volumes: he eluded Indians, fever, hunger and thirst, and fought the wilderness as he made his way back painfully to Mexico, where he brought the news of the vast strange land which spread northwest from the inhospitable shores of the Gulf.

Len was chagrined, but Buckskin laughed at him.

"She moved in on you, son. Wasn't your fault. We got plenty to keep the skinners busy. They ought to be here now. They've counted the shots, know we ain't been missin'. It was a good stand."

The moments passed and Buckskin got restless. He went away to a high ridge and Len saw he kept well out of sight, though the buffalo had dispersed for keeps. Presently he came back, his face grave.

"Son," he said, "I don't like it. I could see plumb to camp and there ain't a sign of movement. We'll ride over there. Follow me, but don't show on skyline for a minute."

They came to the rising ground and saw the tilt of the tent, but there was an ominous quietness about the place. Its cause was soon manifest. The two skinners lay on their faces, bristling with arrows.

"Nothin' we can do about 'em now, Len. We've managed to dodge the war party by blind luck, but they're out for us, right now. Just two things to do. You got to warn the post. They got to get ready for a general raid. Tell Hull or Bat I said these braves wouldn't have dared come so far north if it didn't mean that. They'll understand. You got to get through, Len. All them devils want is to catch the post unprepared. Scorch leather, Len. If it comes to a straightaway, your hoss can beat theirs."

"What are *you* goin' to do?"

"Round up all the camps I can and haze 'em in to the post. I'll be there not long after you. Go straight along this ridge. Never mind about skyline. They know we're here now. If they ride uphill to cut you off, you'll get a lead. There may be other war parties out. You got your six-gun. Don't shoot until you got to, don't throw away a bullet. The main idea is for you to get through."

THIS was Len's first experience with really hostile Indians. He had met them before, but Buckskin had always treated with them and, if they had not been actually friendly, they had not made trouble.

He mounted and rode along the ridge toward the post, watchful, rating his mount. The horror that he had just seen would not leave him. The cook's belly had been ripped and stuffed with grass. The skinners had been horribly slashed. It was evidence of the fiendish cruelty of the tribesmen.

He heard one whoop answered by another. They were not for him. They had sighted Buckskin Joe, off on his errand of salvation, risking his own hope of safety for the chance of helping others. Len believed also that Buckskin had deliberately exposed himself to draw the pursuit from Len, or at least delay it.

It was a scant respite. From right and left came other whoops. He saw two naked warriors, welded to steeds as savage and excited as their masters. They were Kiowas, he thought, since they had no lances. That meant that the outside tribes were in with Quanah. Two arrows came slithering, dropping short. They made no attempt to climb the ridge. He thought they wanted to draw his fire and charge before he could reload.

That was Indian tactics, spoiled greatly since the invention of the Colt. He could not help but admire their horsemanship, their perfect balance as their ponies leaped boulders, swerving, squealing, entering into the chase.

He could tell that they felt sure of him, and that gave zest to their sport. But he knew he was a match for them, if it came to the pinch. His six-gun had as good a range as their arrows and bullets were more deadly. With any sort of cover, he could hold them off and stand a good chance of getting them if they came too close.

But he couldn't do that. It was not his own life but that of the men at the post. He had to get through, if he could, and they did not mean to let him, if they could prevent it.

He was coming to the end of the ridge. It pitched downward steeply over rough ground. Beyond it, he must skirt a marsh that drained into Bent's Creek, then gallop hell-bent along that for the post where 'Dobe Creek came in.

The two bucks were taking it easy. Len let a link of speed out of his horse with a spur prick, and the two braves kept even. He saw the breakdown at the end of the ridge with dismay. He owned two horses, and the roan he was riding today had the bottom and speed of the other, but it was not so sure-footed, and the descent was badly broken up.

From the sides of his eyes, he noticed the two bucks look up at him exultantly. They could not see each other with the ridge between them, but they acted in perfect accord, almost stride for stride. They would strike to head him off while he came down the pitch.

They had no saddles and Len's weighed over thirty pounds. His Sharps rifle was another fifteen. He wished he could trade the rifle for another Colt. It was little use save as a club, and they would never get close enough for him to use it that way. They would riddle him and his horse with arrows. They would tear off his scalp, stuff his dead mouth and his still hot belly with grass, mutilate him to show their contempt of him as a man.

Thinking like that did no good. He had come to the brink of the ridge. The pitch was like a broken prow.

Yahoo! Yahoo!

On either side, the braves pricked their ponies with their knives, darted forward in unison to cut him off before he got to the level.

Len stabbed the roan with his rowels, and the good horse went headlong at the job. Loose stones broke away, ledges crumbled, its shoes struck fire from smooth rock surfaces. It stumbled and recovered, Len helping it, striving to keep his weight placed, his six-gun ready. Now the roan slid on its tail, forefeet braced, once a dwarf tree snagged it, and Len was nearly sent over its head.

They hit an old landslide and went down with it, fetlock deep in sliding talus, flinging up a mantle of dust, through which the feathered shafts came flying, seeking him. It was a close call as to who would first reach the tip. The Kiowas were yelling at every jump of their ponies.

An arrow slid across Len's chest, grazing his skin, held there by the cloth. Another went through the back of his thigh. He heard and felt the *thup* as one smacked into the flank of his horse, and another struck its withers on the far side, hitting the shoulder-blade.

CHAPTER IV

Making History

HURT, indignant, the roan wrenched its hoofs clear of the loose, clogging débris at every leap it gave. The Indian ponies squealed and the roan neighed back defiance. Hitting the level, she stretched out till the grass brushed against her belly.

But they thought they had him now. With their own weights no greater than Len's unhandicapped by any rigging, their ponies could hold their own with the roan in a sprint, and might even beat him for two or three hundred yards.

Len groaned as he bade farewell to his Sharps, tossing it away. He needed every ounce he could gain.

An arrow went through the crest of the roan. Another seared the back of Len's head, just under the rim of his hat. A third carried his sombrero away and the brave howled his delight.

The roan was holding its own, it was even forging ahead. Len knew it had been hit in other places. He could hear the whoosh of shafts that barely missed him. He was riding far forward. He felt a sharp pain, as if a redhot wire passed from the side to the front of his body. An arrow had struck a rib, followed it in its curve.

Len neckreined the roan, swung it to the right. The maneuver took the warrior on that side by surprise, upset the calculations of both braves. They had no idea but that he would make a straight runaway of it, and they would make porcupines of him and his horse.

Wham! Wham!

The Kiowa made his pony rear, but Len was judging his shots. He put a bullet through the mustang's brain and, as it crashed down, sent his second slug to where it traced a red score on the warrior's ribs. The Indian's pony rolled over him, crushing him, breaking his thigh, kicking him in its last throes.

Len hauled on the curb, swung the roan on hind legs and sent it tilting against the pony of the other brave. He saw the painted face, the snarling mouth and blazing eyes, as the Kiowa launched his arrow at short range, dropped his bow, and stabbed with his long scalping blade.

The stroke failed. The Kiowa was dying, with blood gushing from his mouth. Drooping, he slithered off his pony. The heavy charge and bullet of the Colt had fairly scorched his flesh, torn through heart and lungs, left a hole the size of his head in his back.

The roan headed for the creek, wheezing as it went. The last arrow had badly injured it. But it was game, ready to give until the last heartbeat. It went falteringly, its pace muddled, stumbling now and then, with always the hoarse whistle, from lungs or windpipe. Len could not see where the shaft had hit in front. He was bleeding badly himself from his thigh, though no artery had been severed.

The power of the roan failed like a dying swing. A hundred yards from the creek, it came to its knees, groaning, fell slowly over on its side as Len got clear. It lifted its head, a fading gleam in its eye that seemed to apologize. It would not die immediately but it would rise no more. Len shot it, reloaded his six-gun.

He broke off the arrow in his thigh below the feathers and pulled the shaft clear of his legs. He stuffed the hole with clean dust on both sides, bound his neckerchief

above the wound. It was a mile yet to the post, and he was afoot.

He started for the river, limping. And then he broke into a run.

Ya-ya-yahoo!

He had been sighted. Other braves, three of them were after him.

The grass was long. Len flung himself into a slide, like a mink, and went down the bank into the water. He swam beneath the surface, making for the bank, clutching willow roots, worming a way to a hiding place—and to air.

He heard their shouts as they thrashed through the heavy brush that kept them back from the creek in most places. They could not see him. He prayed that they would guess he was wounded and think he had drowned. He waited for what seemed an hour after he believed them gone, feeling that he, too, like the roan, had given his best—and failed. He would be too late to warn the post.

BUT he was alive, and he could swim. The current was with him and the creek was deep. The water was reviving and he tried not to use his wounded leg.

At last, he saw the point where 'Dobe Creek came in. He could hear the calling of men, white men, distant, but not too far away. The Indians had not yet attacked.

He crawled up the bank, dizzy as he stood erect, his sight blurred before he rallied.

The post was less than half a mile. Men were milling about it. He could see wagons dashing in at full gallop, their teamsters lashing the frantic horses.

Len gave a shout. A horseman came out of the ruck, on a big, rawboned gray. It was Buckskin Joe.

"Set your foot on mine, Len. Thank God you come through."

Buckskin's sinewy arm was about him, holding him close as the gray loped back.

"You got here first," panted Len.

"Nip and tuck. You'd have been in time. Wounded, ain't you? We'll fix that."

But the wound did not get fixed properly until later. Buckskin put his own bandana about the leg as they reached the post.

A shout rang out.

"*Inside! Inside!* Here they come!"

A thousand warriors of three tribes, set loose by their wizards, Quanah leading them, the War Chiefs of the allied Nations in the van.

Odds of over three hundred to one.

There were nine men in Hanrahan's restaurant and saloon, including Buckskin, and Bat Masterson, Hull, and ten more were in Myers' store. Six in the other store.

They barricaded Hanrahan's with lumber, and the bar. In the stores, they piled up sacks of grain and flour.

And then the howling tribesmen broke upon them like a tidal wave.

Ponies were backed against the doors, rifles fired pointblank through the windows. The Indians had plenty of firearms, rifles and pistols. Their screeching was the sound of hell in tumult. The little street about the buildings, all the bottom lands were filled with the painted warriors in anticipated triumph, surging in, with less than the third of a hundred whites against them.

It was the battle of 'Dobe Walls, never to be forgotten long after the frontier vanished.

The buffalo guns began to boom. Pluming smoke and bullets came through the smashed windows between the loopholes left in the barricade, and every slug meant the death of a brave, sometimes of two as the lead tore through flesh and bone.

The wave broke, leaving dead warriors in the dust, the wind waving their headplumes of eagle's feathers. Dead ponies on their backs, legs stilted, pools of blood, blood spattered on the adobe walls.

The thud of ponies' hoofs died, returning like low thunder in the second charge. Quanah led on a chestnut, rigged with a Spanish saddle. He wore buffalo horns above the war bonnet that trailed behind him over the pony's croup.

They shook their weapons in threats, the sun shining on their coppery bodies striped with paint, quartered with it,

chanting their war songs.

Flour spurted from piled sacks. Again and again they forced their kicking ponies to back up to the windows, half-broken mustangs, mad as their masters, ready to bite and rend.

But they made no attempt to storm in the face of that steady fire of Sharps. They swept past, time and time again. and when they had passed, they had taken their dead along with them.

The rifles grew hot, the rooms were choking with the reek of powder smoke. There was but little water in the two stores.

GRADUALLY, the rushes came at longer intervals. The savages were beginning to reckon their dead. They were not breaking, but the adobe buildings could not be forced. The attack reached high tide, and no breach had yet been made.

There was a lull at noon. A man risked trying to run for a bucket of water, from Myers' store to the trough close by. He got the bucket filled, and the gleam of it was torture to the fevered men.

"There's Billy Taylor, the blamed fool," cried Masterson. "They ain't drawn off. It's just a ruse."

There was a rush of ponies and Taylor dropped. A warrior ran him through with a lance, and then Masterson broke his spine with a snap shot.

As yet, Len was the only wounded one among them. But it could not last. The ammunition, plentiful as it was to begin with, was getting low. Once a breach was made, the end would be swift, but horrible—a frenzy of gashed, living flesh.

Len, his tongue swollen, his throat raw from the acrid fumes of the powder, could understand how thirst had driven Taylor out. And now, the last of their own water disappeared as they passed around the bucket in a respite, while Quanah and his War Chiefs held council.

"I could stand a real drink," said someone, looking at the bottles in the rack behind the bar.

"You'll leave that alone," said Masterson. "Ain't you got nerve enough to die sober?"

"If we could only get Quanah!" Buckskin said.

He slit Len's pants with his knife and looked at the wound in his thigh. It had swollen and the whole leg was purplish.

"Tourniquet's too tight," said Buckskin. "You ain't goin' to die from that, Len. I'll fix it while we got a chance."

He had been chewing tobacco and he slapped the chaw on both sides of the wound, bound it up again. It smarted, but before that the leg had been numb and Len welcomed the sting.

"If we get Quanah," Buckskin repeated, "they might quit. I lined on him twice, but some other red skunk got in the way of my lead. Well, boys, we've put up one hell of a fight. We've killed more than Kit Carson. They've lost two hundred, or I miss my count."

"Here they come!"

The drumroll of hoofs sounded. It was a magnificent and awful spectacle. But this time, the War Chiefs and Quanah had stayed behind in a group. They knew the white men must be short of water. Taylor had given that away. They guessed their bullets must be getting short. Before sunset, they would break through, scalp and maim, carry some off for torture about the fires.

"Son," said Buckskin to Len, almost pleadingly. "Do you think you could get him? It's a hell of a long shot, but if you could, it might mean a heap. It would sure discourage 'em. I've fought Injuns plenty, and Jim Bridger and Kit Carson, they agree with me. Injuns are brave but they got to be worked up—and they can be worked down. It's what Kit Carson calls bustin' their morale. That's a word he got from his daughter, who's in school at St. Louis."

Len was already loading. The heat was almost insupportable from the sun beating down all day on the bloody scene of battle, the constant discharge of firearms, the lack of ventilation. His head throbbed and his eyeballs seemed gritty.

He peered through a loophole and

gauged the shadows. The shot seemed impossible. He was not even sure the charge, heavy as it was, would carry that far. It was worth trying, of course.

His head and sight seemed to clear with the resolve. Quanah was recognizable only by his war head-dress at such a distance. Len saw his head lift, his left arm stretch out as he gave an order, from the knoll where he was watching the fight with the War Chiefs.

It was an order. The Indians came again. It could hardly be called a charge since there would be no hand-to-hand resistance, but it was magnificent as a spectacle. Sooner or later, a charge like that would end in breaking through the barricaded windows and doors, and a massacre of the exhausted defenders. Unless—

LEN slowly, surely, evenly squeezed the trigger. The V of his high-raised hind sight held the bead of the front sight. *Boom!*

There came the recoil, the plume of smoke.

A yell went up from the redskins that stopped the charge in its tracks. It was a howl of rage and despair from those who saw Quanah fling up his rifle arm, dropping the weapon as he swayed and fell from his horse.

The savage shout was echoed by the cheer the whites gave out.

It was the end! Quanah was mortally wounded—after the Medicine Men had assured him he could not be hurt by the white men, that their magic armored him.

There were dead ponies all over the field, their grass-fed bellies beginning to swell. The reluctant retreat began. Quanah, barely breathing, was borne off by another warrior. There would be much wailing in the lodges.

The smoke cleared, quiet reigned, broken by buzzing of a myriad of flies. Some warriors appeared as tiny figures on the bluffs, shaking fists and guns in impotent gestures of rage.

The whites rushed to the trough outside the trading store and drank like beasts, plunging their heads into the warm water.

The long day began to close, with the bluffs in shadow. Buckskin Joe prepared to go out and bring in the bodies of his skinners and the cook.

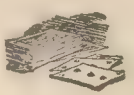
There was one attacker left on the field, lying face down. He was not naked but wore buckskin, fringed at the seams. His face was painted and there were feathers twisted in his hair. It was Kiowa Brett, the renegade.

"Shows what they think of him," said Hull. "Probably forced him to fight but he wasn't worth carrying off. That was a whale of a shot you made, Young Hawkeye. It won the fight. How's that leg?"

"Doin' all right," Len said.

He had almost forgotten he was wounded in the glow that warmed him when Quanah toppled, and which was still with him as Bat Masterson came up. He held out his hand to Len, as if in a ritual.

"Son," he said, "shake. I'm glad to grip the hand that made that shot. I've just been measurin' it, steppin' it off careful as I could, and she's over a thousand yards. Ain't even Kit Carson ever equalled that! Aside from shootin' Quanah, you sure made history today."



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SAGEBRUSH SAVVY

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Which ranks higher as a law officer in the west, a United States Marshal or a Texas Ranger?—B. M. (N. J.)

A.—Actually neither outranks the other, because their authority lies in different fields. The U. S. Marshal's duty is limited to the enforcement of federal laws, that is, laws of the national government, not those of individual states. The Texas Ranger's job is limited to enforcement of laws of the State of Texas.

Q.—I always thought the frontier mining camp of Virginia City was in Nevada. Now a friend wants to bet me it was in Montana. Who is right?—L. G. G. (Conn.)

A.—Both of you. Virginia City, Nevada and Virginia City, Montana were both rip-roaring mining towns.

Q.—Travelling by car, how can I follow, as near as possible, the old Santa Fe Trail from Kansas City to Santa Fe?—R. W. (Mo.)

A.—Take U. S. Hwy. 50 out of Kansas City. Where it forks into 50 North and 50 South, take 50 N. to Larned, Kans. Then Kans. 45 to Kinsley, then U. S. 50 S. to its juncture with U. S. 50 N. at Garden City. Then U. S. 50 to La Junta, Colo., U. S. 350 to Trinidad, Colo., and U. S. 85 on in to Santa Fe, N. M. At many places on this route, if you watch for them, grass grown ruts of the famous Old Trail are still plainly visible.

Q.—What would be the chance of making a trip by boat from El Paso, Texas down the Rio Grande to the Gulf of Mexico?—F. W. (Ohio).

A.—I would say no chance at all—unless you want to carry the boat more than you ride in it. The Rio Grande is not a big river as you know rivers in the east, and so much of its water is taken out for irrigation that for long stretches it is often just a trickle in a wide stretch of sand.

Q.—Who was Charles Goodnight?—J. D. McD. (Ala.)

A.—J. Evetts Haley wrote a whole book to answer that one, but, briefly, Goodnight was a pioneer Texas cattleman and trail driver who established the JA Ranch in partnership with an Englishman named Adair in the Texas Panhandle when it was still open range. He was a pioneer in improving the breed of beef cattle, and the first to cross them with buffalo. Goodnight, Texas was named for him. The JA Ranch is still a big cow outfit. Goodnight died in 1929 at the age of 93.

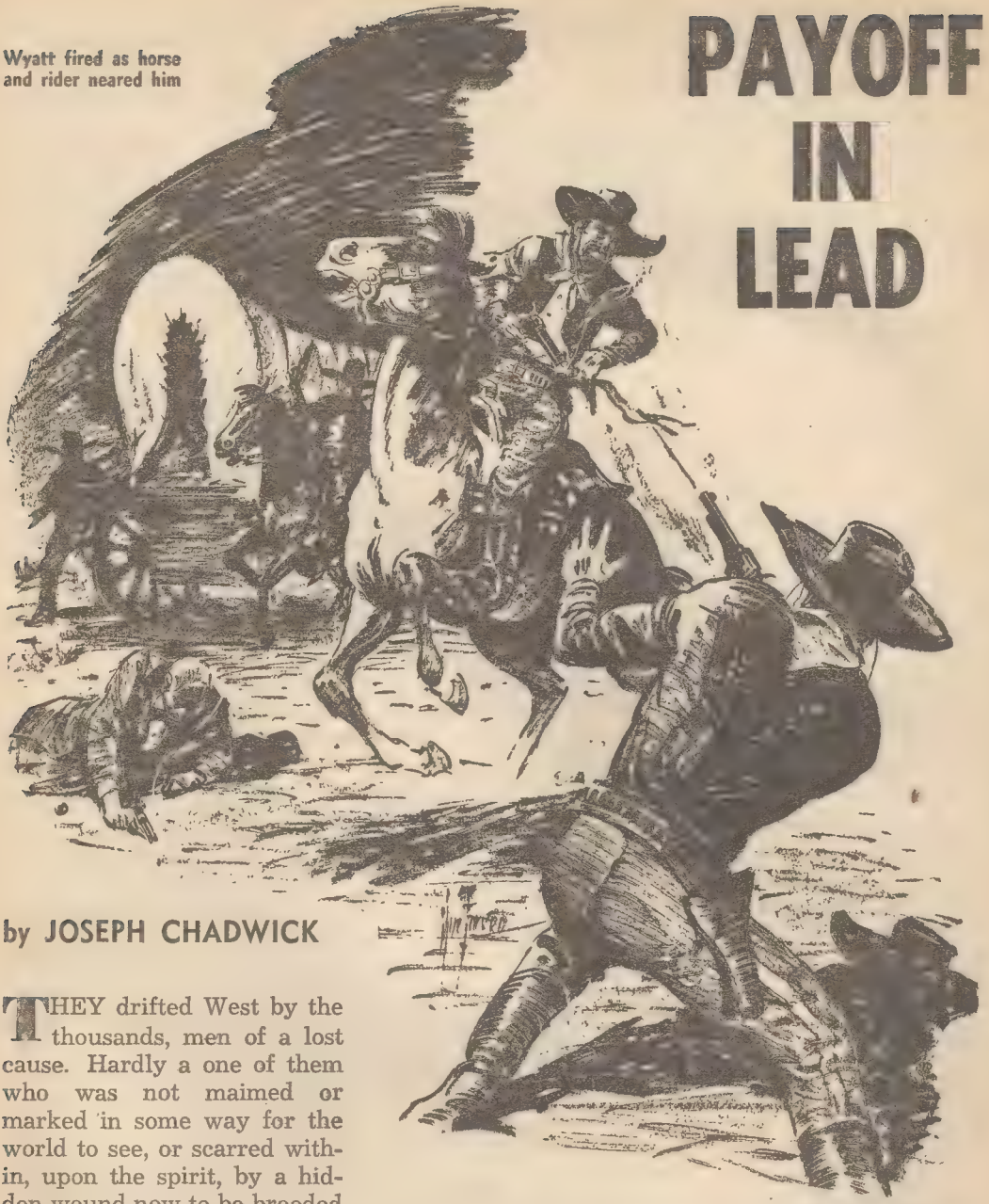
Q.—Do modern cattle ranches still use chuck-wagons?—M. M. (Pa.)

A.—Many modern ranches use trucks for chuckwagons, but a lot of outfits, like the Bell Ranch in New Mexico, still work their roundups with horse or mule drawn chuck-wagons as in the old days.

Q.—What do cowboys mean by a "Texas tie"?—B. F. C. (Wis.)

A.—The home end of a lariat tied solid to the saddlehorn is a "Texas tie." While some cowboys on the oldtime ranges in other parts of the west took dallies or half-hitches around the saddlehorn to anchor their ropes, most Texas cowboys always tied fast. "Whenever I rope something," a Texas cowboy once said, "it's either mine, or I'm its!"

PAYOFF IN LEAD



Wyatt fired as horse and rider neared him

by JOSEPH CHADWICK

Long was the vengeance trail Jeff Wyatt followed, and strange its ending

THEY drifted West by the thousands, men of a lost cause. Hardly a one of them who was not maimed or marked in some way for the world to see, or scarred within, upon the spirit, by a hidden wound now to be brooded over.

They traveled many different trails, these men who once had worn Confederate gray, seeking new homes and a new life. For some, the war was over and done with. For others, like Jeff Wyatt, it never would be ended. Such men as these last had suffered most, lost too much.

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West from Appomattox. A year and more was gone. A thousand miles and more lay behind him. The trail was cold, and still Jeff Wyatt followed it, lost it, found it again. Neither time nor distance dimmed the unholy desire for revenge that prodded him. He had sworn to kill a man, and it was not in him to back down.

He drifted in from the desert, a big man grown gaunt and haggard. He walked his chestnut horse, bred to be a Virginia hunter, along the crooked street with its ugly board houses and bleak false-fronted business places.

The sun was down and the town had not yet come alive. It was a mining camp, a Nevada boom town tucked away in the foothills of Old Washoe. Jeff Wyatt pulled his mount up to a saloon's hitch-rack and, after a moment's deliberation, dismounted.

Three men on the saloon's awninged porch stopped their talk and eyed him. They considered his appearance, noted that he wore, along with flannel shirt and a flat-crowned black sombrero, gray breeches seamed with faded yellow cavalry stripes.

"Another Johnny Reb," one of the trio said.

Jeff Wyatt heard and looked up from tying the chestnut's reins. He stared at the three men until he stared them out of countenance.

"No offense, stranger," one mumbled, and the three turned away.

This town was Globe. It was a sorry place, and yet it pulsed with life and hope. Burly, bearded men were drifting in from the diggings. Freighters had put up their wagons and teams and surged forth to find an evening's pleasure. Lamplight glowed behind windows and doorways.

Globe had its secrets, and one of them Jeff Wyatt must know. Fraser Blyth, the man he hunted, had been heard of last heading for Globe.

Saloon or eating-place? A drink or a meal? Wyatt took a silver dollar—his last—from his pocket and reflected upon it. He was lean and hunger gnawed at him. But food would not dull the torment in his mind—that turmoil of hatred and endless disappointments and fear of failure. A drink would help. Whisky would burn away ugly memories for a time.

Ducking under the hitch-rail, Jeff Wyatt walked into the saloon with the silver dollar tightly clenched in his hand.

The bar was not yet busy. The bartender set a glass before Wyatt, whom he already had eyed.

"Bourbon for you, suh?" he said, in an unmistakable Southern drawl. He reached for a bottle, poured a stiff drink, then looked quickly about. "The proprietor is at supper, suh. This one's on the house."

"Thanks," said Wyatt. "Your health, friend."

He drank, the whisky forming a glow inside him, and dropped the silver dollar back into his pocket.

"Hunting a job?" the bartender said.

"No—a man."

"Maybe I know him."

"Fraser Blyth," Wyatt said, and the name was uttered like a blasphemy.

A group of red-shirted miners came noisily into the saloon.

"Never heard the name," the bartender said. "What's his trade?"

"Back in Virginia," Wyatt said, "he was called a carpetbagger."

That got the bartender. His eyes narrowed and his lips formed a silent curse. He poured Wyatt another free drink, then went to serve the miners.

One drink had warmed Jeff Wyatt, suffused him with a false sense of ease, but the second, quickly gulped, clamped viselike upon his mind. He needed a meal. He had been a fool to drink on an empty stomach. His vision blurred and he became lightheaded.

In a few minutes the bartender returned.

"Friend, watch yourself in this town," he whispered. "It is a pesthole of sharpsters, tinhorns, and footpads. Claims are jumped, drunks are rolled, men are murdered for their pokes." He shook his

head, outraged. "Every dark corner is a deadfall. Keep your gun loose in its holster. Good luck, suh. And good hunting."

Wyatt nodded. He turned away from the bar and walked with lurching step toward the swinging doors. He was not really drunk; the lightheadedness was caused by hunger as much as by whisky. He hit the board sidewalk in front of the saloon, stood swaying while contemplating his next move. He still had his silver dollar, enough for a meal, but food could wait a few minutes longer.

He had not forgotten Fraser Blyth. If the blackleg was in this town, he most likely would be at the hotel. Globe must have a hotel. Jeff Wyatt went in search of it.

It was dark now, and there in midtown the street was crowded with people. Wyatt picked his way carefully through the milling throng. The crooked street angled off, and beyond the angle was dark and almost deserted. The buildings here were freight warehouses, and mostly dark. No hotel would be here, but Wyatt, befuddled as he was, pressed on.

He heard the sounds of a wagon and team somewhere ahead in the darkness. Two men came out of an alleyway, walking toward him. They kept coming at Wyatt, offering him no leeway on the sidewalk. It was not in him to step off the boards. He meant to shoulder between the two.

They met head-on, as it were. One of the two muttered, "Now!" And Wyatt dropped hand to gunbutt too late.

He remembered, also too late, the bartender's warning of footpads. A blow of some heavy weapon smashed down upon him. His sombrero was knocked off. The club struck again, a glancing blow alongside Wyatt's head. Pain exploded in him and he collapsed to his knees.

He got his gun half drawn, but a savage kick knocked it from his hand. A knife blade glinted, aimed for his throat. From somewhere a gun roared. The knifeman screamed, let his blade clatter to the boardwalk.

Murder and robbery fled from the footpads' thoughts. The two assailants themselves fled, one trailing blood from a wounded arm.

Jeff Wyatt retrieved his fallen pistol and climbed to his feet. Vaguely he saw the covered Murphy wagon that had pulled up. He saw the man and the woman upon the high seat, the man holding a rifle in his hands. The couple climbed down.

"Stranger," the man said, "it sure looks like we saved your life."

A handful of people, drawn by the gunshot, gathered and circled about in gaping curiosity. One man held a lantern and its pale glow painted the obscure faces as with a bold brush. The man was an oldster, gray-bearded and stooped. The woman was young, a girl, golden-haired in the lantern light.

Waves of dizziness rose in Jeff Wyatt. Bitterness gripped him, a bitterness against the sneaks who had attacked him, against the curious crowd, and even against these two well-meaning people who had saved his life. Saved his life? A worthless thing, dedicated to the seeking of revenge. Wyatt's mind was rebelling as he thrust his hand into his pocket. He brought it out. He tossed his silver dollar at the feet of the old man with the rifle.

"You saved my life," he muttered. "That's all it's worth. I pay my debts. I'll not be beholden to you."

Friendliness faded from the bearded old face. A murmur lifted from the small crowd. The girl caught her breath, stared with widening eyes. Wyatt turned away. He walked five steps and then his knees buckled. Hunger, whisky, pain in his head, got him. He fell sprawling to the ground.

WAKING, Jeff Wyatt found the sun in his eyes. And in his nostrils the fine smell of food cooking. He struggled, and the movement started his head throbbing. He reached up his hands and found his head bandaged. He lay in his own bedroll.

Lifting himself up on his elbows, he looked around and saw that he was in a camp by a desert water-hole. A ramshackle Murphy wagon stood nearby, and three horses—two of them crowbaits and the third his own chestnut—stood grazing on the scant forage. There was a fire and a man was adding fuel to it. A woman was frying bacon and watching a batch of sourdough biscuits. Beyond, the desert was vast and empty.

"What am I doing here?" The question worked around in Wyatt's mind, and he had no answer for it.

He remembered, slowly, the gray-bearded oldster and the yellow-haired girl. The ones who had saved his life in Globe. They whom he had insulted with his silver dollar and his crazy talk.

Crazy talk? No—for a long time, he had not cared whether he lived or died. His life meant nothing, except as an instrument of vengeance.

He flung aside the blanket covering him. His boots stood within reach. He pulled them on. He felt like an empty shell. As he rose and stumbled toward the fire, the man and the girl looked up.

"Mornin', friend," the man said. The girl smiled.

This friendliness jolted Jeff Wyatt. It was a thing rarely met, and it shattered some of the long-built-up hatred within him.

"You brought me here?" he said. "You cared for me?" He shook his head. "It is something I do not understand."

"You passed out on us last night," the man said. "I told Dorrie—my granddaughter, here—that somebody had better care for you. After seein' them hardcases jump you, we figgered Globe wasn't safe for a man in your condition. You been sick, Mister—"

"Wyatt's the name. Jeff Wyatt."

"I'm Eby Seton."

"I owe you a lot," Wyatt said. "More than I can ever repay."

"You owe us nothing," Dorrie Seton said, shyness keeping her from looking directly at him. "Sit down and share our breakfast."

Coffee, biscuits and bacon. The three of them sat around the fire and ate without talk. It seemed to Jeff Wyatt a meal fit for a king, and food could force the lobo instincts out of any man.

Following Eby Seton's lead, he took out his pipe and lighted up. There still was pain in his head from the blows of the footpads' club, but beyond that he felt fit.

Dorrie began to clear up the breakfast things, but as Wyatt and her granddad started to talk, she lingered close by to listen. She was a pretty girl, with a buxom figure beneath her gingham dress. She had eyes as clear blue as a crystal mountain lake. Jeff Wyatt watched her, thinking not so much of her but of another girl—the girl he would have married had it not been for Fraser Blyth.

"You talked delirious," Eby Seton said. "You talked about your chestnut hoss, for one thing—and we hunted it and fetched it along. A fine animal, that. Few like it on the desert."

"We bred hunters," Wyatt said. "Back in Virginia, before the war. We had a plantation—" His voice trailed off, his mind shying away from ugly memories.

The plantation no longer belonged to the Wyatt family. Carpet-baggers from the North, those greedy and scheming sharpsters who had followed the victorious Union armies with an eye for gain, had got control of the Wyatt plantation, along with many others.

"A good mount, the chestnut," he said. "I call him Lancer."

Eby Seton watched him with thoughtful eyes, and the girl also seemed to read his whole sad story. There was pity in her eyes, and it was quite clear that Dorrie Seton could forget her own obvious poverty and sympathize with another unfortunate.

"We're heading for Virginia City, Gramp and I," she said in her shy way. "You're welcome to travel with us, Mr. Wyatt. We have plenty of food. At Virginia City, we're going to homestead. Gramp is a carpenter and we think there'll be plenty of work for him there.

Do you have a trade, Jeff—I mean, Mr. Wyatt?"

Wyatt smiled at her, and it was his first real smile in more than a year.

"No, I haven't a trade," he told her. "I was a gentleman farmer in the past, and now I'm nothing. I have been on the trail—"

He broke off, not wanting these two decent people to know why he had been on the trail so long—the vengeance trail.

Dorrie gathered up her pans, tincups and plates and went to the water-hole to wash them. Old Eby went to catch up the horses. Jeff Wyatt smoked his pipe out, thinking confused thoughts. It would be pleasant to travel with these people, but he had sworn to follow Fraser Blyth's meandering trail. Thank the Setons, he told himself, and part from them.

"You are no longer fit company for decent folks," he thought. "You are a lobo wolf on a blood trail, and you will kill a man—or die trying to. You have nothing in this world but to ride on and on, alone!"

IT WAS then the girl's shadow fell before him. He looked up and found her studying him, strange knowledge in her eyes.

"Forget the past," she said quietly. "No injury done you is worth so much hate."

He rose and faced her, a great unease in him.

"I talked so much in my delirium?" he asked.

"You talked of many things," Dorrie said. "I rode inside the wagon with you during the night. I held you still when you thrashed about. I gave you water. I felt your fever burn against my arm." She dropped her gaze from his, her cheeks staining red with the embarrassment of the moment. Then, bravely: "I grew to know you well. You'll kill this man called Fraser Blyth. And then?"

"And then," said Wyatt, "I shall live again."

Dorrie shook her head, seeming wise beyond her years.

"No. Then you will run along another trail, not hunting a man but fleeing from one—from yourself." She studied him again, gravely. "One thing you did not talk of when your mind wandered—you did not talk of what wrong Fraser Blyth did you. I wonder what it was."

What wrong? It was no little thing. It was not a thing a man could talk about. It was a thing that at times grew obscure even in Jeff Wyatt's own mind, for he had no room except for hatred and the thought of revenge. But he wanted to kill Fraser Blyth for more than being of what he called that blackleg breed, the carpet-bagger. Fraser Blyth had stolen Jeff Wyatt's fiancée, Louise Harlan. With charm and good looks and a stolen wealth, Fraser Blyth had made Louise forget her given promise to Jeff Wyatt.

It had been during the turmoil immediately following the war's end, when a beaten people who had lost all hope grasped at straws to save themselves. Louise Harlan was of a once-wealthy family. She had lived a pleasant, comfortable life and she must have viewed the future with horror. She had turned to Fraser Blyth, had married him because he offered her the sort of life that was important to her. And Louise had left only a brief letter of explanation for Jeff Wyatt.

Now, with Fraser Blyth still eluding him, Jeff Wyatt faced a girl who was no more than a stranger to him. He hardened his face, determined not to let her have her woman's way with him.

Dorrie Seton flushed, hurt by the rebuff. "It was a woman, of course," she said, and turned away . . .

Despite his resolve, Wyatt rode with the Setons. He turned his back upon Globe, where Fraser Blyth was supposed to be, and headed with the emigrant wagon toward Virginia City.

"I will ride to Virginia City with you," he had told Old Eby and Dorrie, "and help you get settled there. I owe you that much."

Dorrie had suddenly become haughty, making a show of stiff pride.

"You owe us nothing," she told him.

"Do not waste your precious time on us."

But her grandfather had chuckled humorously, and said, "Glad to have you, Jeff. We need a young man along." He had winked at Wyatt. "Dorrie is plumb glad, too, havin' taken a fancy to you, but she won't let on."

"Gramp," said Dorrie sharply, "mind your talk!"

She was displeased with Jeff Wyatt and wanted him to know it.

The rickety wagon, drawn by its crow-bait team, crawled westward. Wyatt rode his chestnut hunter, keeping close to the wagon. A change inside him was making itself felt, for now, after having traveled so long and so far alone, he was glad for company.

He began to envy the Setons. Old Eby seemed a happy-go-lucky sort, even though he possessed little of life's better things. And Dorrie was young and eager. Her life must have been pleasant despite poverty, and her future was before her like a golden promise. No embittering thing had touched them.

Old Eby began to sing in an offkey voice as he tooled his team along. Seated beside him, Dorrie smiled with a sudden brightness for the words of the song.

"Oh, Susanna, don't you cry for me . . ."

"That was fine, Gramp," she said delightedly. "Sing us another!"

At midday they swung from the trackless desert onto a hard-used road. They passed freight wagons headed for the diggings at Globe and the Setons exchanged friendly greetings with the mule-skinners. Had Wyatt been alone, he would have questioned the men with the wagon train, questioned them in the hope that they knew of Fraser Blyth and of his whereabouts.

But with Dorrie Seton's eyes to rebuke him, he kept silent. Once he saw these people safely settled in Virginia City, he would take Fraser Blyth's trail again. Jeff Wyatt resolved that. But the truth was that there was reluctance in him. Something had changed him, and revenge no longer seemed the one important thing in his life.

LATE in the day, they overtook an emigrant train—some twenty wagons headed for the gold fields. It was a slow-moving caravan, paced by slow-gaited oxen.

"We may as well fall in with these folks," Eby Seton said. "They'll be settlin', buildin' homes, and they'll need a carpenter. Good thing to get acquainted now." A roguish glint appeared in his aged eyes. "Good thing for Dorrie," he added. "Maybe there'll be a good man in the outfit, one a-huntin' for a buxom girl for a wife."

"Gramp," Dorrie said tartly. "I don't need your help to find a husband!"

Eby chuckled. "You mean you already found one? Jeff, here? Well, that beats me! A-sparkin' right under my nose!"

Dorrie reddened. "Why, I never heard of such talk!"

"Gramp is joking you," Wyatt said, and looked at her thoughtful eyes.

At sundown the wagon train halted by water and made night camp. Horses were unharnessed, oxen freed from yokes. Campfires blazed and soon there was the good smell of food cooking. Half a dozen children, trailed by a couple of dogs, raced about playing some game.

When full darkness closed down, more wood was added and the fires kept back the night. Eby Seton brought a fiddle from his wagon, seated himself on a wagon tongue, and tuned up.

"How about a fandango, folks?" he called out.

Men noisily applauded that and drew their womenfolk forward for the dance. Old Eby's fiddle played loudly and well and the couples stepped lively in a square dance. They danced on the bare rough ground as happily as though it was a ballroom floor.

Jeff Wyatt's memory reached back and he recalled other dances—lovely women, well-dressed men, a good orchestra. Louise and himself dancing together.

"Jeff, grab yourself a pardner!" Eby Seton called out.

Wyatt saw that no man had claimed Dorrie, even though she was by far the

prettiest girl in the gathering. He supposed that the other men considered Dorrie his to claim. He walked toward her, saw eagerness light up her eyes. But before he reached her, the carriage came.

It was a fine rig, more fitted for a town street than a desert road. It was drawn by two spanking bays. Swinging off the road, the carriage rolled up to the camp and came to a stop. The driver leaned from the seat.

"Friends," he called, "darkness has overtaken us on the road. We are in need of food and a place to rest." He paused to cough; it was a spasm of coughing. Then he asked, "Could you offer us hospitality?"

Wyatt did not answer. His face had turned rock-hard. He knew that at last he was facing Fraser Blyth, for the woman who sat beside the man in the carriage was she who had been Louise Harlan.

The fiddling went on and the dancing did not stop. Only Wyatt and Dorrie Seton gave heed to these new arrivals. And Dorrie, glancing at Wyatt with eyes wise and knowing, answered the man who must be Fraser Blyth.

"You may stop here," Dorrie said. "There is food in plenty. I will fix you something."

Fraser Blyth got from the carriage, thanking her. He was not at all the sort of man Wyatt had expected to find one day. Blyth was far from the man Wyatt would have believed could win a woman away from him.

He was a handsome man, a man of good manners and careful dress, but there was nothing vital about him, no appearance of strength. Blyth was thin, so thin that even his cheeks were sunken, and he had a pallor that hinted at illness. He helped Louise from the carriage and the two came forward into the camp.

Louise's glance touched Wyatt. Firelight was full on her lovely face. Wyatt saw the color drain from her cheeks. Her step faltered, her hand tightened on her husband's arm, and her lips moved without giving any sound at all. Fraser Blyth gave her an anxious look.

"Louise, what is wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing," she managed to reply. "I merely am tired."

Blyth patted her hand. "We'll stay the night here and you can rest," he told her. He looked at Wyatt. "Friend, will you unharness my horses, grain and water them?"

The rockiness was still on Wyatt's face.

"Blyth," he said flatly, "care for your own horses. I am not your lackey."

"Jeff, please don't!" Louise cried.

Alarm masked Blyth's pale face and he stared almost wildly at Jeff Wyatt.

"Louise, is this the man who has been trailing us?" he asked in an empty voice. "Is this the man—"

He saw the answer on his wife's frightened face.

"I warn you, sir," he said to Wyatt. "I do not go armed. You kill me, it will be murder—and you'll hang!"

"Blyth, a man who takes another man's woman should go armed," Wyatt said. "You're safe this night, but when we meet again, be armed. You understand?"

JEFF turned and walked away, finding no satisfaction in this chance meeting. His hate was real enough, he still had his wild desire for revenge, but the killing of such a man as Fraser Blyth promised to be an empty thing. What did he expect to gain by killing the man? Did he want Louise Harlan?

Troubled in his mind, Wyatt watched the couple from back in the shadows. They were making a show of eating the meal Dorrie Seton served them, but it was clear that both had lost their appetite.

Dorrie came seeking Jeff, her pretty face troubled.

"Jeff, put this thing out of your mind," she whispered. "Don't rob that woman of her happiness. She'll lose it soon enough, for her husband is a sick man. That's plain enough for you to see. Jeff, you love her, but you can never have her back. You're not the only person who has lost a loved one. My mother—"

Her quiet, urgent words forced their way into Wyatt's hardened mind. She told him how her father had been killed early in the war, and how her mother had died shortly afterward of a broken heart. Grief was in her voice, and Wyatt suddenly realized that Dorrie Seton also had suffered a great sorrow and yet was able to smile and laugh and look ahead with hope.

He felt his resolve weaken. But some stubbornness, some hurt pride, made him say: "Men die when caught stealing a horse. This Fraser Blyth stole all that was important to me. I swore I'd kill him, or die trying to kill him."

"To satisfy your awful pride," Dorrie said, and turned from him.

Old Eby Seton was still fiddling and the emigrant folks were still dancing. Jeff Wyatt remained in the shadows by the wagons, watching the man and woman by the fire.

Four riders coming from the direction of Globe swung off the road and into the camp. They put their blowing horses right in among the dancers, scattering the flushed and excited people with loud shouts and flourished six-guns.

"Stop that blamed fiddlin'!" the leader of the four, a burly and red-faced hardcase, shouted at Eby Seton.

The music stopped in a screech.

"It's Rondo Greer and his wild bunch!" a man said in a frightened whisper.

The emigrant folks were backing away, bunching up, cowed by the outlaws' guns. Fraser Blyth and his wife had risen, and upon their faces Jeff Wyatt could see not only fear but despair. Wyatt, still hidden in the shadows, drew his cavalry pistol.

Rondo Greer swung his horse around so that he faced the Blyths, and his heavy face wore a taunting grin.

"Did you figger you could shake me, Blyth?" he loudly demanded. "Not Rondo Greer, hombre! You turned your friends in Globe on me, but this is different. These people can't side you." His voice hardened. "You put over a minin' deal in Globe, Blyth, and you cleared twenty thousand dollars on it. You've got the money, in yellowbacks, on you." He gestured with his gun. "Hand it over, else I'll shoot you and take it!"

Wyatt stood unnoticed, gun in hand. This was a bold robbery, but it was not his game. He could shoot Rondo Greer from the saddle, but that would turn loose the guns of the other three outlaws. Best to let Blyth lose his money.

Fraser Blyth, looking beaten, was reaching inside his coat as if to bring out his wallet. But he brought out a derringer.

All hell broke loose in the camp. Blyth's derringer roared, but he missed Rondo Greer, for at the moment of firing he pushed his wife to the ground with a sweep of his left arm. Greer's six-gun blasted, and Blyth was downed with a bullet in his left thigh.

Women screamed. The whole emigrant crowd started milling wildly about. Rondo Greer had aimed his six-gun for a killing shot at Blyth when Jeff Wyatt stepped forward.

"Greer—this way, Greer!" he shouted.

He fired, but missed Rondo Greer and hit one of the outlaws behind the wild-bunch leader. Faced with this new threat, Greer jabbed spurs to his horse and tried to run Wyatt down. His gun blazed as he galloped forward, but Wyatt now was moving fast.

Wyatt lunged forward at a crouching run, putting himself on Greer's left side so that the outlaw had awkward shooting. Wyatt fired as horse and rider neared him. Greer heaved in the saddle as the bullet struck him. The wildly running horse sheered off, ran past Wyatt, and then bucked off his dying rider. Rondo Greer struck the ground in a loose heap.

The two remaining outlaws fired at Wyatt from across the camp. Then, as Wyatt swung his gun on them, they broke and ran. Wyatt fired another shot after them as they reached the road. Darkness swallowed them.

TWO OUTLAWS lay dead. Fraser Blyth lay groaning, a bullet wound in his thigh. Carpetbagger he may have

been, but he had the makings of a man, Jeff Wyatt thought as he halted by the wounded man.

Louise sat on the ground beside her husband. She had lifted his head and cradled it in her lap. There were tears in her eyes, on her cheeks. Wyatt holstered his pistol. He took out his knife and slit Blyth's breeches, baring the wound.

The emigrant folks crowded around. Old Eby still held bow and fiddle. Dorrie was there, staring at Jeff Wyatt as though she never had seen him before, and her eyes were pleased with what she saw.

"Dorrie, heat water—a lot of it," Wyatt said. "And find some carbolic if you can." He handed his knife to an emigrant man. "Sharpen it up, then clean it over a flame. If somebody has whisky, fetch it."

Louise Blyth stared at Wyatt as though he were a stranger.

"That slug has got to be dug out," he said to the wounded man. "It's not going to be easy on you."

The pale face of Fraser Blyth was suddenly stubborn.

"I'll stand it," he said, and added: "Wyatt, you trailed me for more than a year and meant to kill me. I know, because men warned me. And now you saved my life. Why?"

Why? Jeff Wyatt looked up at Dorrie Seton, who was placing a pail of water on the campfire. He did not know why he had sided Fraser Blyth. It must have been because of that golden-haired girl, so that one day he might ask her, with a guiltless mind, to share his life.

It was afterward, when the crude surgery was finished and Fraser Blyth was resting, that Jeff Wyatt went to Dorrie Seton.

The emigrant folks watched, as people always smilingly watch young lovers, but what they saw puzzled them. First, the big man in the faded cavalry breeches said: "Dorrie, I've been thinking—maybe Gramp could teach me the carpentering trade."

Dorrie smiled, her face radiant.

Then came the puzzling part. The girl took from the pocket of her gingham dress a silver dollar. She gave the big coin to Jeff Wyatt. She did not speak. The watching people could not know that Dorrie Seton had paid off a grudge of her own.

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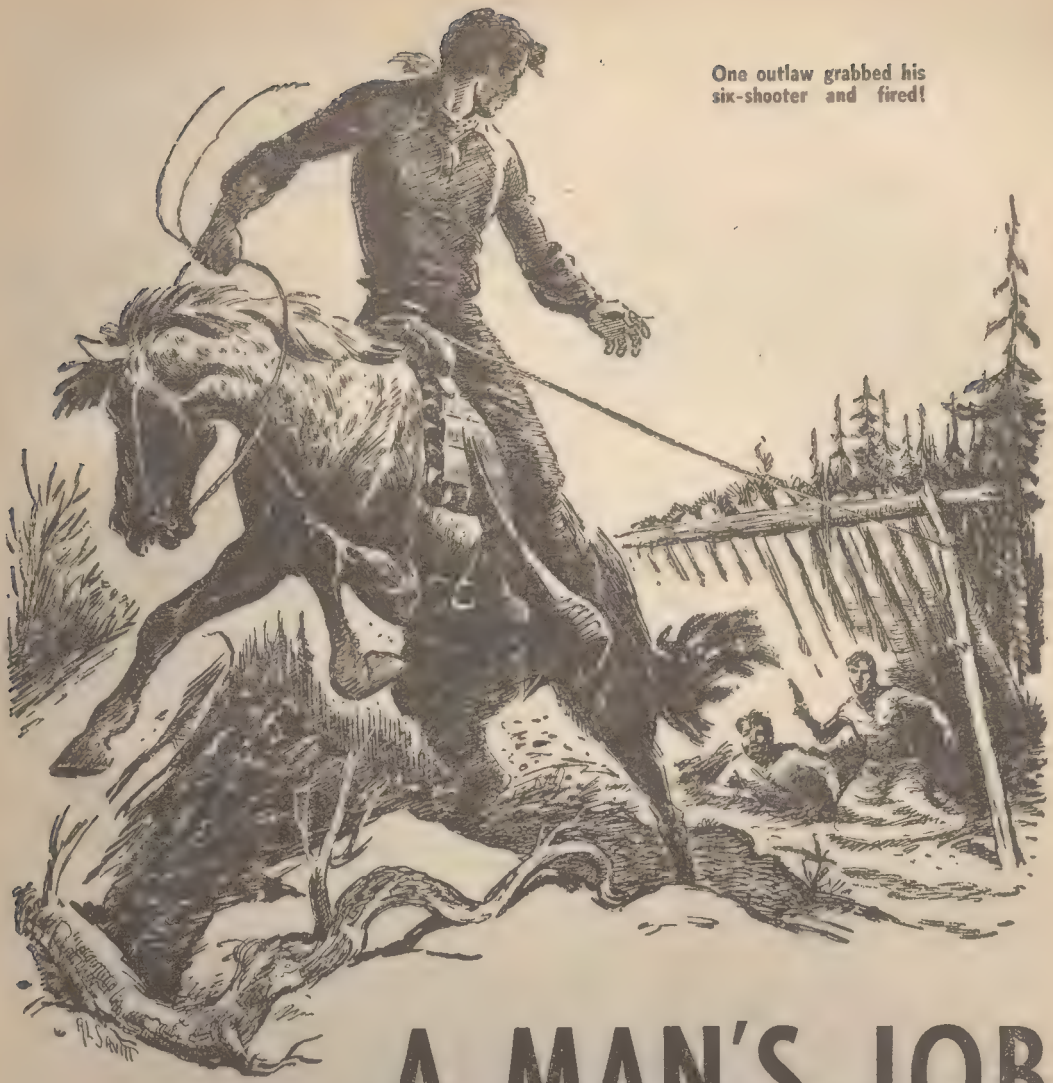

One outlaw grabbed his six-shooter and fired!

A MAN'S JOB

Thirty a month riding line, or fast horses and the owlhoot— Slim must Choose!

By CADDO CAMERON

LEAN and lanky Slim Wilson took a long breath and held it while the NL boss was making up his mind. After what seemed like plenty time, Old Man Banks declared, "You're hired. I'll give you Dead Man's line camp. It's a year-round ridin' job and takes a man to hold it."

Slim wondered why the hands in the bunkhouse yard looked at him peculiar-like when the boss said that. Did they suspect he had lied about his age, or what? Sure, he

had lied. When a boy is only seventeen and hits a big outfit like the NL for a man's job, he'd better put on a few years. Slim had made himself look older, too. Before riding into NL headquarters he had let his black hair hang straight down around his ears to make his dark face even more lantern jawed, and he hadn't cracked a smile while talking to the Old Man. Or maybe the boys thought he was a breed.

Back home, folks said the long-geared Wilson kid had some of the best blood in Texas in his veins, but he had been raised like a wild Indian so no wonder he looked and behaved like one.

Slim had a hard time hobbling his smile, though, when he got this line riding job—his first job as a full-fledged cowhand. On his home range in the West Cross Timbers he had worked stock since he'd been old enough to straddle a fork and had gone up the trail once. But men who knew him always gave him the horse herd at the home ranch or hung the remuda on him when trailing—kid wrangler work, which he considered a disgrace to a mighty-nigh six-footer. Of course, they said they did it because he could track a bat through smoke on a dark night and no bunch quitter ever got away from him.

But older hands were poking fun at Slim and it was getting him down. When a fella got so he went to dodging girls and had a hard time looking other boys in the eye, he'd better do something about it. So Slim had decided it took too long for a boy to grow up where folks knew his age, and he hit for strange country where a fella could lie about it and get him a man's job.

AND now—hot damn! Line rider for the good old NL! Of course, he didn't know anything much about the outfit and had been working for it less than a minute, but it was his outfit now and that made it the best daggoned outfit in all Texas. Those hands had no call to look as if they were kind of sorry for him. He was a-settin' deep in the wood, a-fixin' to ride 'em slick for the old NL. Slim wanted to uncork himself with a long yell.

Then the Old Man sort of drove home the stopper on his enthusiasm. He called Slim aside, and confidentially told him, "Kinda hate to set a new man off to ride that Dead Man's line. We've lost men up there. My old hands swear it's ha'nted and none of 'em want the job. You afraid of ha'nts?"

"N-no. I was brought up on ha'nts," lied Slim.

"The kind that shoot a man when he's looking the other way?"

"Y-yeah. They ain't bad when you know how to handle 'em."

"But me—I figure it ain't ha'nts that killed off our boys," said the cattleman. "It's the Billy McSpaden Gang. They hole up in the Wichitas over in The Territory north of Dead Man's camp."

Slim's heart jumped clean to his tonsils. Billy McSpaden! The top outlaw in all Creation, in Slim's estimation. A killer, too. And plumb slick. U. S. Marshals had choused Billy all over The Indian Territory without once sighting his dust, and Texas Rangers had chased the McSpaden Boys from Red River to the gulf and from the Sabine to Mexico and all they caught were saddle sores.

A man's job! thought Slim Wilson. *More like a ten-man job. I ain't a-huntin' no Billy McSpaden. Time I was long gone from here. But it's too late now.* Aloud, he said, "Yeah, that McSpaden Bunch tried to raid my home range a while back. A few of us Cross Timbers boys taken out after 'em. They hit the Trinity when she was big swimming water, and I'll swear—they hit her so hard their horses fogged across in a mile-high cloud of dust. We let 'em go."

"Mmmm—do tell? Them McSpadens must've been fairly scared."

"Maybeso," modestly admitted Slim. "But you can't blame 'em much."

Old Man Banks thoughtfully stroked his whiskers. He ran a keen eye up and down Slim's length, and told him, "We're losing stuff through that valley. Got to keep men at Dead Man's camp. If I can get a holt of somebody else that will go, I'll send you a pardner or two. Meantime,

boy, ride with yo' chin on your shoulder and sleep with all yo' eyes open."

Doleful Jones was elected to take the new hand and his mount of six horses to camp and locate him. On the twenty-mile ride north Slim Wilson wanted to ask a hundred questions, but figured he'd better cut it to about fifty. He did, and got answers to six.

"Why do they call it Dead Man's camp?"

"On acount of dead men."

"How many?"

"About three."

"NL line riders?"

"No-o," drawled Doleful. "Dead men don't ride much in this cussed country. But they was NL line riders *befo'* they died."

"Somebody shoot 'em?"

"We kinda calc'lated the boys had been shot. They had holes in 'em."

"Is the NL an honest outfit to ride for?"

"Every bit as honest as I am."

"D'you reckon I'm a fool to take this job?"

"Hard to tell. If you *don't* take it, you may have to live a mighty long time and life can be powerful tough on a fella."

After thinking that over, Slim decided it was no fun trying to talk to this old wrinkle-neck.

They rode into Dead Man's camp an hour before sundown. At sight of the place Slim forgot ha'nts and Billy McSpaden and such, and his chest swelled with pride and pleasure. This was a line rider's dream, a pioneer's abandoned home—log cabin, smokehouse, shed-roofed stalls and a little pole corral, squatting comfortably near a motte of timber at a spring from which a branch wandered off across the valley.

While shoving the loose horses into the corral Slim looked around him, and exclaimed, "Betcha this is the best dadblamed camp in Texas!"

"She's a good camp," droned the old hand. "Nobody ever has to live here long. Even the man that built it didn't."

"How come?"

"Kiowas. Old Satank and his bucks went by here. They left blood on the floor and walls. It's there yet."

Slim stepped off to close the gate. "Was that about ten years ago?"

Doleful glanced quickly at him. "Yes. How did you know?"

"Guessed it." Slim's lean face tightened momentarily. Satank and his raiders had swept southward that time. They paused at the log cabin where Slim was born. He'd never forget what he had seen upon climbing down from the loft where his mother had hidden him.

A bachelor uncle moved in and raised the orphan boy. Slim Wilson grew up in a house with blood stains on its floor and walls.

As they walked toward the cabin, he said quietly, "No need for you to pilot me around. Just point out landmarks."

DOLEFUL JONES squinted up at the tall boy, then squirted tobacco juice at a grasshopper. "Spunky, eh? All right—" He pointed at an escarpment in the west, turned and pointed to another in the east. "See them bluffs? They're fifteen mile apart. You ride from here to one, back to t'other and into camps every day. NL stuff never climbs to the flat land on top. Plenty scenery, but no water and not much feed up there. Keep a eye on the valley. It's only eight mile north to the Red. Cross that river and you're in The Territory where they ain't no law and mighty little God. Our Nellie cows are righteous cows. They don't never want to go to no such a country, but sometimes they can't help themselves."

"Thieves?"

"Slickest in the business. The Billy McSpaden Gang from up in the Kiowa-Comanche Country. And they pack rifles."

Slim Wilson gazed north toward Red River . . . *A man's job at last* . . . He looked a little older, felt a lot older already.

Grinning down at Doleful, he drawled, "Much obliged, Mistah Jones. I'll be riding line in the morning."

The old hand grunted, mounted, pointed his horse south. "Recollect, son—you'll

be riding in the tracks of dead men."

Slim was too busy to do much thinking for a while. He dropped his pack from the dun that carried it, caught out the horse he'd ride tomorrow and staked it near the cabin, put twisted rawhide hobbles on the others and turned them out to graze. A little coyote acted kind of homesick, so he sidelined it, knowing how far a hobbled horse could travel in a night. Slim already loved these horses—his first string. He'd bet his bottom dollar they were the best cowhorses in Texas.

Cabin was slick, too. Bunks filled with fine, soft hay—no bluestem stuff. He didn't mind those dark stains on the whipsawed oak floor and log wall—didn't mind them much. Coaloil lamp, water bucket and can of oil here for a fella. Funny how thieves stole cows and horses and wouldn't take such things from a vacant cabin for fear some sick or wounded man might throw off here and need them.

Slim went to the spring after water. As he bent down a dirty greenish-brown snake struck at him. Didn't miss him far, either. He broke its back with a stick, crushed its head with his heel and threw the thing as far as he could. He hated these cussed cotton-mouth moccasins, but didn't mind 'em. Best water he ever tasted. So cold it made his teeth ache.

Getting dark in the cabin, so Slim lighted the lamp. Chimney was smoked up and wick needed trimming, but it sure was a good lamp. He built a cooking fire in the fireplace. Never was a chimney that drew like this one. Why, it would suck a fella's boots up its throat on a still night if he set them too close.

Three scorpions skittered out of it, tails crooked over their backs. He stomped two, but one got away. Hoped it didn't hole up in his blankets. These little old stinging lizards could make it hot for a fella if they bopped him good—maybe paralyze his tongue for a while, but he didn't mind them.

Grub never tasted as good as it did when a man cooked it himself in his own line camp. Slim ate until his flanks were tight as a bloated cow's. And coffee! This water made the best coffee in Texas, just what a man needed when he came in tired from riding line for the Old NL.

The cabin faced east. The door stood wide open. Slim went and looked out. Full moon peeking over the trees. His loose horses grazing close by. Picketed horse feeding near the cabin. He liked to hear its jaws chomp grass. A line rider never got lonesome when he could hear his horse a-chompin' grass. All of a sudden something boomed like a shotgun in a barrel. Slim like to have jumped out of his boots. The roar ended in a sound like one hell of a dog fight. Slim grinned at the old barred owl somewhere out in the trees. He reckoned that was music to the owl's wife or sweetheart, but *he* could do without it.

Plumb foolish to stand in an open door with a lighted room behind him. He moved back quickly, closed the door and shoved home the latch. Both windows were wide open. Place getting chock full of flying things. He went and closed the heavy wooden shutters. Crossing the floor, Slim stepped clean over that dark stain. His eye was drawn to the splotch on the wall above the bunk where he had dropped his bedding roll. He moved his blankets to the other bunk. Come to think of it, with coals in the chimney he didn't need the lamp. He blew it out.

Slim Wilson pulled his six-shooter, twirled its cylinder and put it back. He picked up his Winchester, levered home a cartridge and sat on a bunk with the rifle across his knees . . . *Sure is a man's job, bossing a line camp, twenty miles from headquarters, eight miles from hell.*

SLIM knew the voices that sang the song of the night on the frontier. He listened now for sounds that didn't belong in the night . . . The background hum of insects was good for putting a man to sleep in a line camp, but he wasn't sleepy tonight . . . The long drawn-out bugle note of a wolf came down the valley. Sounded like a lost ghost . . . Three or four coyotes yapped and wailed like forty lunatics. Coyotes were the spirits of folks

that died crazy . . . A big voice boomed, "No bottom! No bottom! Better go round!" An old frog in a pond where somebody had drowned . . . *Huh! He's just a-foolin'. Nobody could drown in that little branch* . . . A wild, piercing cry like a woman getting scalped. Just a screech owl, but it made Slim think of what he heard while hiding in the loft at home that time ten years ago. He wiped his palms on his pant legs.

No sense in me getting flighty, he told himself. *Bugs are a-hummin' steady and that little old mocking bird is a-singin' his head off. They'd all stop if any boogers were around.*

Slim sat that way a long time, listening, head drooped, mouth ajar so as to hear better. Suddenly he realized that something was missing. He lifted his head . . . The insects had stopped. Sometimes they did that, though—turning their music. He waited . . . They didn't start up. The mocking bird broke off on a high note. His horse stopped chomping grass. Chirruping tree frogs, squeaking mice and lots of other little things fell silent. Only man or a killer beast carried silence into the night. Slim stopped breathing.

Out on the flat a horse blew until it rattled the rollers in its nose. His horses! Slim jerked to his feet. He moved like a shadow, cracked a shutter and looked into the moonlight. The loose horses were bunched, heads up, ears pointed to the trees at the spring. The staked horse was looking that way, too. Slim slipped to the door and cautiously opened it a little. He didn't make a sound . . . Something beside a big tree in the shadows down there. Could be a man.

Slim went cold inside. He had never shot a man. Then he thought of his horses and his job. He lifted his rifle. Too dark to see its sights, so he aimed by the glitter on the side of its barrel, and yelled, "Stick 'em up!"

He fired while yelling, for the thing had snapped its head around and its eyes glowed at him—a huge panther standing on its hind legs, reaching up to sharpen its claws!

Slim went and looked at the dead cat. A whopper. A colt killer big enough to pull down a hobbled horse. He touched it carelessly with his toe. Just another dead varmint. All in a day's work when a man was riding line. He moseyed out on the flat and had a talk with his horses. The way they gathered around and sniffed at him and let him fool with them made Slim feel powerful good—like a man, doing a man's job. These horses were smart. They knew he'd take good care of them, wouldn't let anything get 'em. After a while he went and rolled into his bunk and fell asleep, listening to the song of the night.

Close to sundown the next day Slim headed back to camp from the west bluff. He had ridden his line both east and west, thrown south a few bunches drifting north, killed two rattlers, shot at a wolf and missed, roped and tied and doped a cow that screw worms were eating up, and now he was in a sweat to get home and see about his saddle stock. He lifted his sorrel into an easy lope. Upon sighting camp he looked first for the horses. Out on the flat, feeding good. He counted them eagerly. All there. He sat a bit straighter, held his reins a little higher. This was the life for a man—riding line for the Old NL.

Light flickered on metal at the corner of the shed!

Without conscious thought Slim dropped to the far side of his horse. As he went over a bullet gashed his scalp above his ear. The crack of a rifle ripped up and down the valley. Slim fell in high grass. Instinctively, he had kicked his feet clear. He rode with closed reins, so the frightened sorrel galloped to join the others.

For a moment Slim Wilson couldn't think. Surprise, shock and stark fear had numbed his brain. Then he thought of his horses and his job. He threshed around in the grass as he imagined a dying man might do. In this fashion he moved a few feet to a cow-path, down which he could see the camp. He lay still there. Two men took their horses from the stalls and went after his stock. Slim wished for his rifle,

now in its saddle scabbard aboard the sorrel. Wouldn't trust his sixshooter at that range.

He watched them unhobble his horses. Thunder rolled inside his skull and lightning flashed behind his eyes. Slim shook his head to clear it. What would a *man* do in such a fix. Would he go tearing down there and shoot it out with them? Maybe, if he was a gunfighter. Slim wasn't.

They stripped his rigging from the sorrel, which meant that they thought him dead. Some thieves wouldn't steal a dead man's saddle. Bad luck. In a little while they hazed his string north. He watched them pass over a nearby rise. Slim swore that several little horses looked back—looking for him to come and take care of them!

He got to his feet. Tears blurred his eyes. *Set afoot my first day on a man's job. Hell of a man I turned out to be!*

IT NEVER occurred to Slim Wilson that he'd be foolish to trail his horses afoot and try to get them back. He simply *had* to get those horses. Tracking was no trick for him and to dog-trot all day was merely kid stuff, in his estimation. Slim figured he wouldn't have to trail the thieves very far, anyhow. It'd be night by the time they crossed into The Indian Territory, so they'd feel safe and camp.

Slim hurried and washed his wounded head in cold spring water and tied his bandanna around it. Felt better. He ran and brought in his rigging, rifle and hobbles. Afterwards, he shucked his boots and bullhide leggins. Boots slowed him down and chaps made too much noise. He always carried moccasins in his warbag for hunting and tracking afoot. Took off his cartridge belt and six-shooter, too. Might wish he had them, but every pound counted on a long trail. He'd get by with a knife.

While hastily coiling his rope around his shoulders, Slim looked hungrily at the grub box on the wall and the cold coffeepot in the fireplace. Didn't have time. He took a hunk of last night's cornbread, stuffed a double-handful of mixed currants and raisins into his pocket and drank to the grounds from the pot. A feller ought to be able to run all night on that bait.

Slim Wilson headed north at a trot in the early twilight. Through high grass in the valley the horses had left a trail anyone could follow in the dark, and he figured the moon would be going strong by the time he covered the eight miles to Red River. Shamed by the loss of his horses and goaded by fear of failure on his first man's job, Slim might've run himself to death. Time and again he had to slow down. He was like a horse crazy to run and frantically fighting for its head.

By the time Slim's lean and impatient legs had pushed the eight miles behind, the moon was up there to help him. It pointed out the ford—a break in a cutbank, and turned to white the reddish yellow sand in the wide river bed down which sluggishly crawled the narrow low-water stream. The boy had to force himself to rest. He stretched his length on the sand, physically relaxed, mentally tormented by the biggest problem of his lifetime. He'd find his horses, all right. Kid stuff. But would he be able to take them away from the thieves? A man's job.

Slim couldn't rest long. He took off his moccasins, ran to the water's edge, quickly found fresh horse tracks in the wet sand and waded across. The moon showed him a worn trail up the bank ahead. There he discovered that the horses had gone this way, moving more slowly now that they were out of Texas. His heart beat a little faster. Again he struck a long-legged, noiseless trot, fighting for his head.

After a while the fresh tracks in the trail ended at a dry wash. Slim worked out the sign and quickly discovered that the thieves had turned left and followed the creek bed. Trees partially shaded the wash, but eight horses left an easy trail for him. The thieves wouldn't go far on this poor footing. It wouldn't be long now. Slim could hardly hold himself in check. He was like a high-headed horse in sight of home. He wanted to get there.

Within less than two miles Slim found something he had heard of, but never seen—a thieves' way station; large pole corral at a pond fed by a small branch, and farther up stream at the spring a woodsman's lean-to shelter for men. Two horses under saddle were staked near it. His NL horses were in the corral. He counted them. All there.

The boy's throat tightened with pleasure and excitement. This would be a double-barreled cinch—kid stuff. Go in and slap his rope on one to ride, open the gate and take 'em easy down the wash for a ways, then hellbent for home. The thieves were asleep. Figured they had killed him and didn't expect anyone on their tails. A cinch!

With his hand on the gate bar, Slim stopped. Sure, he'd get his horses that way, but he wouldn't be doing a man's job. The thieves would come back—might wake up and catch him before he got home. *A man would get the thieves, too.*

The boy suddenly realized how tired he was. Hadn't worn moccasins for quite a while. Accustomed to high heels, his feet ached and his calves were cramping. From the knees up his legs felt dead as fence rails. He was hungry and weak and his head was fit to bust wide open where that bullet creased him. He leaned on the top bar and looked at his horses and thought of the grub box and soft bunk in camp . . . And he thought, *After so long I got me a man's job. Can't throw off on it now.*

Slim moved silently up the branch, taking silence with him. The background hum of insects faltered and died at his approach. Other little sounds died, too. The ever-present Texas mocking bird took wing, singing as he flew away. A sudden night silence would awaken some wary out-door men. Slim paused, listened. No sound from the shelter. The picketed horses paid him no mind. He went on—went close. Two men sleeping under the shelter, fully clothed, gunbelts and rifles within easy reach of their hands.

The boy tried to figure what a man

[*Turn page*]

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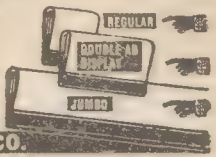

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would do now. The thieves would wake up if he undertook to steal all their weapons. Might grab a gun and try to hold them. But they were gunmen, more than likely. Maybe he'd get one. The other would surely get him. Besides, he was afraid to try that—just plain afraid. Of course, he *could* slip in there and knife them, cut their throats. Two quick swipes would do it, even if they were waking up. He had stuck many a hog, bled many a beef. Looking at the sleeping men he recalled how blood gushed over your hand when you stuck a hog or bled a beef . . . *Damned if I can do that to a man!*

FEELING mighty helpless and groping for an idea, Slim looked the shelter over. It was like half a gable roof—forked posts upright in the ground supporting a ridgepole, ten-foot logs placed close together with one end on the pole and the other on the ground. The heavy logs were sheathed with small saplings and limbs over which buffalo grass sod had been tamped in layers. An idea struck Slim, so risky it made him tingle.

He carefully tied his rope high on one of the supporting posts. Walking to a picketed horse, he let the rope lay out on the ground. Slow work. Dare not make a sound. Every time he set a foot down had to make certain there wasn't a twig or dead leaf under it. He took a rope from a thief's saddle and went back to the other post. As he reached up to tie the lariat one of the men sighed, muttered, rolled over uneasily—coming awake!

Slim froze. His heart beat loud enough to wake up a man. Like most boys of his day and region, he could imitate many wild things. He went to whistling snatches from the mocking bird's song, softly, as if it were high in a tree somewhere. Kid stuff, but it worked. In a moment the man was breathing heavily again.

Moving more cautiously than ever, Slim finally got aboard a thief's horse and tied both ropes to the saddlehorn. He moved the animal ahead easy to test the posts. Saddle leather creaked, the posts gave a little and the roof logs scraped. The men instantly sat up.

One growled, "What the hell!"

The other grabbed his six-shooter and fired!

Slim Wilson felt the breath of the bullet. He cut the horse with a rope end. It leaped ahead. Both supporting posts jerked out with the ridgepole. The roof crashed down. Muffled oaths and cries of men in pain arose beneath it. Slim jumped off and ran back.

The boy's heart was in his throat, but he managed to call out, "D'you give up?"

A strained voice gasped, "Help! I'm—! My back!"

Another groaned.

Slim ran quickly and got a postoak sapling that had been cut and dragged in for firewood. He started to pry up a log—stopped. *Why not leave 'em be?* he thought. *They can't get out. They'll die under there. I've done my job. Got the thieves and got my horses. All a man could do.*

"Help, fella! . . . Damn it, man! . . . do something!"

They've got guns. The minute I go to prying, they'll go to shooting. They tried to kill me. To hell with 'em. I'll just leave 'em be.

Slim dropped the pole and began to untie his rope. A man coughed, breathed noisily. The other groaned and whimpered softly.

They were sitting up when the roof fell on them. It's awful heavy . . . Godamighty!

Slim grabbed the pole and fell to work. Tough job for a boy who was mentally and physically worn out, but he succeeded in blocking up enough logs to ease the pressure on the men. They were still pinned down, though. By this time the one who had spoken couldn't or wouldn't answer and the other man's breathing was his only sound. Slim paused for breath, mopped sweat from his drawn face, fearful that he had killed two men.

The layers of sod had grown together

and formed a solid mass of earth, some of which had to be removed before he could raise the logs higher. The boy tore into it with knife and bare hands. He worked frantically, as if his best friends were dying under there. From time to time he called to them. No answer. At length Slim was able to prop some logs high enough to release the men. He dragged them out, both insensible. Afterwards, he crawled in and got a gunbelt and six-shooter.

When Slim Wilson finally got his prisoners to bed in the line camp cabin the following morning, he was a mighty tired boy. Nevertheless, he felt fine. Each of the men had broken ribs. One had a broken collar bone and wrenched knee. The other was almost paralyzed from the waist down by an injured back. They were so badly stove up generally, neither could do more than crook a finger without cussing. Nothing much had been said by anybody since they came to, back there in the thieves' way station.

Slim had taken his weapons outside and didn't even carry his knife. All the while he was building a fire and making coffee in the cabin, he noticed that the fellow with the collar bone was studying him like a trader reading off a horse's good and bad points. This thief was a wiry man with a thin face and blue eyes that made the boy feel kind of cold wherever they touched him.

WHEN Slim propped the crippled man up and gave him a cup of coffee, he grinned and said quietly, "Much obliged, fella. What d'you aim to do with us, if it's a fair question?"

Slim grinned, too. "Ride a close herd on you until somebody comes from headquarters in three four days."

"Mmm—damned fine coffee. Why didn't you shoot us and save yourself a heap of trouble?"

"Figured to keep my ammunition for something dangerous."

The thief grinned again. One friendly word led to another that way, and pretty

[*Turn page*]

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soon he said, "I been watching you, fella. You're too much man for this two-bit job. Any boy that can do what you done last night is too much man for *any* cowhand's job. Come and ride with me a little while and you'll see what I mean."

"D'you run an outfit of your own?"

"I'll-tell-a-man, I do. All fighting men. You'll fit in perfect. We'll be right proud to have you."

All fighting men. Slim felt like he was getting along. He could look moderately innocent when he tried hard. "Sounds purty good. Whereabouts is your home ranch?"

"Up in the Wichitas. I'm Billy McSpaden. Ever hear of me?"

"Oh, shore." *Billy McSpaden hisself! Hot damn! I shore am getting along.* "Have you got a steady riding job open for a man my size?"

The outlaw painfully dragged himself to a more upright position on the bunk. "You betcha. And what-I-mean, it's mighty nigh the top job in my outfit. I been huntin' high and low for a scout. Need an extra special kind of a man for that job and they're damned scarce. You're one of the few."

"Uh-h, yeah. I've done plenty scoutin' here and yonder in my day. Comes kinda natural to me."

"And-you-ain't-talkin', fella," declared McSpaden, "plumb natural. Scouting for my outfit is mighty dangerous work. Our scout rides our best horses and next to me, he gets the biggest cut of our gatherings. Like when we h'ist an army paymaster and lift maybe fifty thousand, what the scout gets ain't tobacco money."

Fifty thousand! Huh! And me riding for thirty a month and found, when I can find it. Slim was cagey. When a mind to, his talk could ride a big circle. "Speaking of horses—what's your saddle stock like, if you don't mind sayin'?"

Billy McSpaden's icy eyes darted over him from hat to heels. Made Slim want to back up to the fire in the chimney. "Nothin' but the *best* in our raymoother. I was just thinking—we've got a tall red horse that'd just fit your long legs. My boys won't fork him. Too mean. But a twister like you could handle the cuss. Half thoroughbred. Fastest horse in a long race I ever seen. That's what a scout needs."

"Yeah, he shore does." *A high red horse—thoroughbred cross.* Being dark himself, red was Slim's favorite color. *Scout for the Billy McSpaden Gang. A man's job, and how. Hot damn! Wouldn't those Cross Timbers boys rear up and do a back-fall when they heard about it? Girls, too. Women like 'em wild.*

The outlaw eyed Slim like a gambler reading his cards, figuring percentages. "Of course," he said casually, "my scout's job ain't all riding and shooting. Take, for instance—we're a-figurin' to clean one of those San 'Tonio gambling palaces. You roll into town on the stage. You're wearin' a hard-boiled hat and a cut-away coat, and you've got you a good-looking woman and a gold-headed walking cane. You sashay into the joint. You're a dead-game sport with money to burn—a gambling fool. You get the lay of the land. Me and the boys slide in. You kinda boss the job then. You throw down on their top gun-fighting house man, then you tell us where to go to comb out all the spondulix. Pretty soon the tables are clean and our money bags are chock full and our long-horses are carrying us skytootin' away, and the night wind is a-whistlin' in our ears. That's the life for a man, ain't it, fella?"

"S-shore is." Slim was so excited he couldn't hardly talk and wouldn't know what to say if he could. After several swallows, he asked, "What about the woman?"

The outlaw laughed quietly. "Drop her in Old San 'Tonio, but hang onto your gold-headed walking cane. It cost more than the woman and it can't talk."

"Yeah, drop her." Slim burst out laughing, too. Maybe it *was* a shade high-pitched and kind of trembly, but he thought it was a wild and reckless laugh, anyhow.

Billy McSpaden's eyes were upon him, asking a question, waiting. Slim wanted to get away from them. It wasn't easy.

He looked through the window at his horses feeding on the flat—the thieves' horses, too. Near the cabin his staked horse was at the end of its picket rope, stretching its neck to reach a particularly good tuft of grass. Couldn't quite make it. The horse lifted its head and cocked its ears inquiringly at him. Knew he'd come and move its picket pin to fresh grass. Trusted him.

That little buckskin was a dead ringer for the pony he rode three years ago when Old Man Jones sold off a herd range delivery, hard cash on a blanket, and gave Slim ten thousand dollars to carry back to headquarters *alone*. He wasn't supposed to hear it, but he did hear the old cowman tell somebody, "Not a particle of risk. That Wilson kid is as honest as a horse."

Nothing cold or shifty about that little buckskin's big eyes. They looked right out at you . . . *As honest as a horse.*

Pretty soon Slim grinned down at the outlaw and drawled, "I'm shore much obliged to you, Mistah McSpaden, but I reckon I can make this two-bit job do me for a while."

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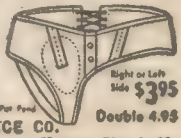

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For Doctor's Bills while in the hospital, up to $500.00
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TOTAL OF $1,500.00

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—Continued from Back Cover

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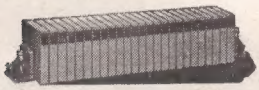

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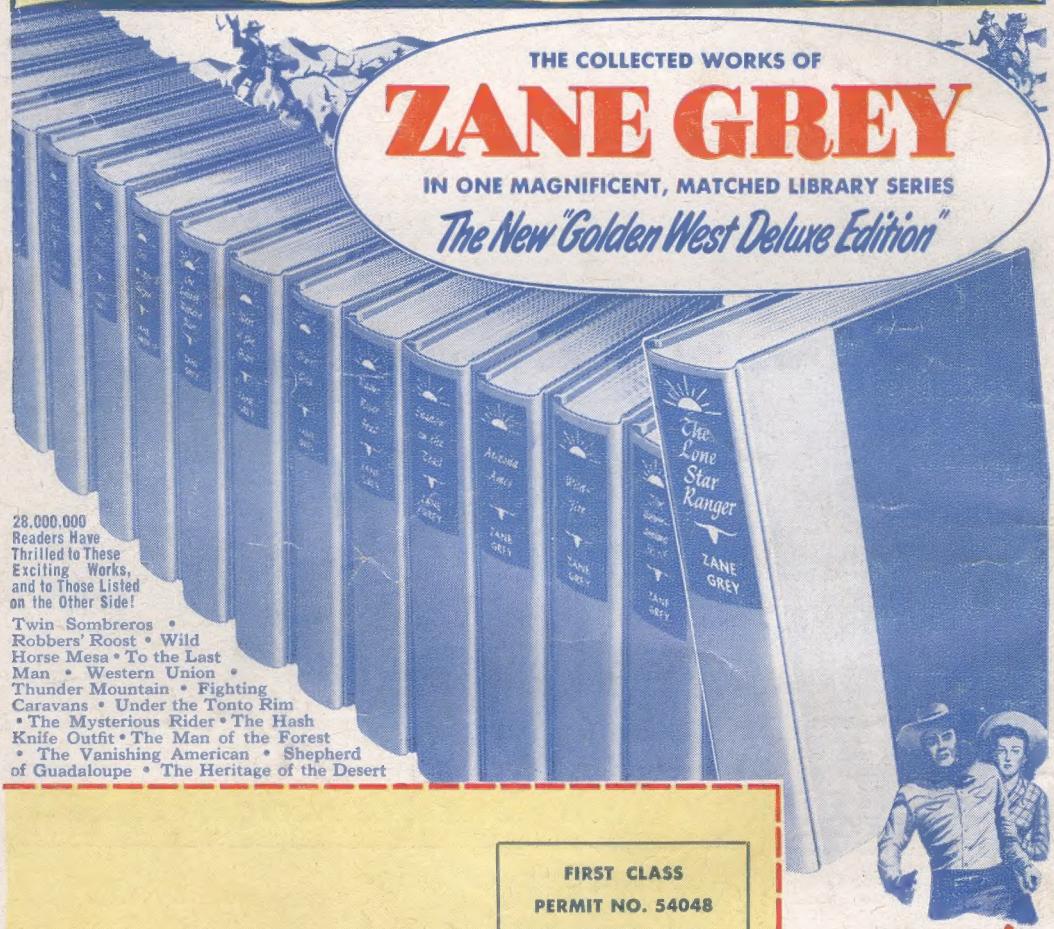

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